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Prince of Persia

Part Two: "The Fight with Fate"

The Prince has corrected his mistake and imprisoned the Sands of Time back in the Hours. He kills the treacherous vizier, returns the dagger to Princess Farah and returns to his native Babylon with the Persian army – everything turns out as if the events in Azad never happened. But the timeline does not forgive mistakes and the past is about to overtake the Prince, for whom there is only one sentence – death. a powerful Time Guardian, forces the Prince to travel to the Island where the Sands of Time were created, in search of a chance to change his fate and avoid death.

Do not do evil, and you will not be in eternal fear.

Sumerian proverb

Chapter 1. Kakkolukkia

~~*Thought overcomes any mystery.*~~
~~*Fate overcomes any thought.*~~

I'm dying... But I guess it doesn't bother me anymore. It doesn't scare me, like a few days ago, when I still couldn't come to terms with it, when I still wanted to fight. Some will say that I have lost hope. I think I found it. How can a person hope for anything if he is afraid of his life, every moment of it, every breath, and that he may be the last? And what is death if not a part of life? Not the end, but the part that was born with us and accompanies us through life? Invisibly, silently, it glides after (or maybe one step ahead!) to come to the moment that is inscribed by fate. And the only thing that matters is what will remain after you...

I don't know what the measure of life and death is. Maybe life is just a flash, just a moment. A drop in the endless sea of the unknown. But without living it, we are not ready to step on the path that death gives us. A calm, unhurried path, flooded with wisdom. Wisdom that is no match for ordinary, earthly wisdom, which is only occasionally able to point out the next right turn in the endless labyrinth. Death destroys these walls, opening up an infinite expanse, allows you to finally look at the sky, at the stars, allows you to feel like a grain of the whole world, and not feel the meaninglessness of your wanderings. It allows us to break free from the shackles of the flesh on which we are constantly dependent. We constantly suffer from pain or think about how to avoid it. And we lose our freedom, the freedom of our consciousness and become slaves of bodies. We are afraid that not only our body, but also our soul, mind and consciousness will cease to exist. Fools! This is not the end, but a real great beginning, birth! This is a great transformation! Sitting in a cage, we are simply unable to see those distant horizons that are actually accessible to consciousness.

Or maybe I'm still afraid? And that's why I come up with all these excuses? Trying to distract my mind from bodily suffering? Probably any dying person thinks the same way. Or very similar. What else to think about before death, if not about the death itself? Maybe about his life? About what happened in it and about what could have happened?

My life is not so great that I should seriously think about it. For almost forty years I did not live at all. I learned wisdom from the

books of my ancestors, prepared for something. But now the end is near, and I still don't understand what I was waiting for. I have not generated a grain of my own wisdom. Instead, I was completely absorbed in the comprehension of the other. Now I am writing this diary. It will become the book of my life. Perhaps it will be, if I find even a drop of my wisdom in it.

I'm afraid again. I don't tremble, I don't want to scream in horror, but only those who are afraid can write the way I think and write now. And only those who are not ready are afraid. He is not ready to accept the enemy, to love him. It is very difficult to love with all your heart what you do not love. Especially when it inspires terror. But fear is born from misunderstanding. Many people forget that everything is built not on fear, but on understanding and awareness. And love is born from them. What is death? First of all, it's perfection! Ideal. Unshakable absolute. And life is chaos. But this does not mean that you should get rid of it. There is always a time for everything. And the chaos of life is not meaningless at all. Against its background, creation is much more visible. And the main creator is man himself. He creates something with his life, with his will. With its chaos. By putting one thing in order, by creating something, a person destroys another. This is inevitable – people are imperfect. And, living his life in constant searches, wanderings and mistakes, a person gradually realizes this, perhaps imperceptibly for himself.

Why are we not given eternal life? Maybe because we will not be able to use it correctly? And really, what will happen? A person, no matter how strong he is, will sooner or later sink into the chaos that gave birth to him. Therefore, there must be an end. And at the same time, a new beginning. Dreams are given to us for the same reason. They are like death, but they do not take our lives, but our fears, problems, and even joy – all our feelings and thoughts. Nothing should be too much and the excess is simply washed away, erased almost without a trace to make room for something else, although it is impossible to completely free oneself from what has been experienced and invented: imperfection is our punishment. Our destiny. And the Great Dream comes, leaving us only what will really be needed there – all the good that happens to us and, sometimes, comes from us; something that is not erased by dreams and is almost timeless. A person is like a torch – it shines brightly. But, having burned out for a long time, it generates too much smoke, ash and blackness. And therefore, sooner or later, it fades away. Like a drop of water in a fountain – no matter how fast it flies up, it will definitely fall down. Is it given to rise again? If this were so, then, perhaps, we would be afraid only of the first death. Dying a second or third time would not be scary at all. But then the path to Perfection would be

much longer and more intricate, and it would be too difficult to find it, to distinguish it from what is happening.

But there are absolute, insurmountable and inevitable things in human life. Or rather, only one – our fate. It is perfect. It's hard to believe, because we consider her cruel and stupid for all the pain that she gives us at the most unexpected moments. But the perfection of fate is not in the fact that it should please people, but in the fact that it is a path carved in stone for each of us, from which it is impossible to turn back.

Namtar's Journal, Entry 1

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The sharp silence hurt his ears. The endless dashing beats of his heart, trying to break out, hurt him. He no longer wanted to live, although he had only managed to walk a few steps. One question swirled in his head: where were these steps? Towards what or away from what? And why does this useless sun shine? His rays did not warm him, they only pretended to give him the warmth that reminded him so much of his lost happiness. Lost forever. Or maybe he did not find it? Maybe there was nothing? He was just dreaming, yes! Just a stupid dream. A dream that cannot be forgotten. And it is impossible to invent.

There was no silence. There was nothing. In his soul, there was only a meaningless emptiness and pain that squeezed him from the outside. A monotonous hum rang in his ears. These were the sounds of nature. So beautiful, caressing any ear and pleasing anyone. But not him. The foul hum, consisting of the rustling of leaves, the morning cries of birds, forcing obedience to the mute voice spoken by nature, awakening from sleep and rejoicing in the new day as if it were a new life, deprived him of life. He felt simply superfluous. Not only here. Everywhere. Anywhere, wherever his heavy, shaking foot stepped. It is surprising how quickly life backtracked, giving way to mental anguish that seemed to be trying to finish off the Prince. The life that everything here breathed left his soul along with all the joy. Even from the most secret corners. He destroyed it himself a second ago. For the last time, he looked into her black eyes. He loved them. And he will forever remember this second. It had everything: surprise, curiosity, maybe even a desire to detain him. But why? Did she know why he had come to her that night? To get the dagger back? He could keep it or try to destroy it. He was on his way to see her. Empty, meaningless hope beckoned him, depriving him of will and reason. Obeying his heart, he ran to her. To those coveted eyes

that he seemed to have known and loved all his life. And probably he will never forget. But he will never see it either. Never! NEVER!

Unable to control himself, he screamed.

"She'll hear..." – thought the Prince, and a second later he seemed to answer himself: "Let him hear – so what?"

He was drawn back. It seemed that even his heart was beating so wildly that it was pulling him up. To get up, to tear himself away from the pain that had grown into him in an instant, like an age-old tree growing into the ground. Yes, exactly! He felt like a lifeless tree. Dry. Dead. And his feelings are just raindrops that he does not care about. The tree will never bloom again.

The prince knew he had to move on. Get out of here, away from the pain. But it was everywhere, like the wind, whose burning gusts wrapped around his neck, turning into a noose that did not suffocate, but only tormented him. Is his mistake really irreparable? He saved hundreds of lives, he saved thousands of people from suffering. And what did he get in return? He received all this pain as a gift. The whole world around him faded and it seemed that even his eyes turned from blue to gray.

Lost... Lost forever! A small grain of sand lost in the abyss. And there is no turning back. And there is no way forward. You can only stay here and wait for death. Maybe it will be a deliverance? A sufficient punishment for his mistake?

Or maybe there is no redemption? An unforgivable mistake? And eternal punishment. Life in pain. Death in agony. And no peace after? Never... The word was spinning in his head against his will, he hated it. He hated himself. With mad eyes he darted around, and if he had come across someone, he would have simply grabbed a weapon and killed. It doesn't matter who and why. He just killed.

A surge of anger made him get up and run somewhere, not caring about the road, not thinking about anything. He wanted to run to the end of the world and jump off the cliff just to drown out this merciless stream of thoughts. Maybe there he will find his peace? And what if this abyss is endless? And he is doomed to these eternal torments, not even having the right to dispose of his own life. Always falling, flying into the abyss, but never crashing. Or maybe we need to run even further? Beyond the end of time? To swim against the current and plunge into the primordial darkness, from which everything came out, and in which there is nothing? And then it will be gone, there will be no torment. It turns out as if he never existed in this world. Is a person capable of such a thing?

The prince suddenly stumbled and fell to the ground with all his might. And even here everything was against him. He felt his aching knee receive a new portion of pain. Like a hand touching a sharp-angled stone that came out of nowhere. How the skin tears. Like

dirty, damp earth gets clogged into a wound. His hand slips, and he slams his face into the sharp, dry grass, which cuts his face, leaving many thin red streaks on it. Anger turned into powerlessness, then another scream, but compared to the previous one, this one was just a whisper.

The prince felt as if he had been divided in two. He felt whole only next to her. A step back, a second of indifference and a fall. It was even worse than those moments before her death. Those eyes loved him, but then he had to say goodbye to them. And a minute ago, it was as if she had died for the second time. But its second part seemed to still remain somewhere there.

He was in a daze. The prince could not move. All the worst and most terrible things that he had experienced in his life were united in him now. He wanted to dig the ground on which he was lying. Mercilessly throw clods of earth at yourself. At the trees that rustled happily in the wind around him. Into the hated sun. Into every corner of your soul. Maybe this way he will be able to suffocate and get rid of the torment?! The nasty sun! He wished him dead... Death to all living things. The whole world was hateful to him. He was ready to jump up now and cut everything that fell under the blow of the sword. The sand he touched with his face was ready to crumble into dust with his teeth.

The prince closed his eyes. Moments from his life flashed before him - many of them were happy. Once they were. Now he was ready to grab any of them in his hands, without hesitation to tear them to shreds and scatter them to the wind. Unable to do so, he slammed his fist desperately on the ground. Another disgusting feeling permeated him - he felt that he would have enough strength to remain conscious for more than one hour, and maybe even more than one day. He could not just wait for the night and save himself by sleep. And if he could, it would not be salvation, but another torment. Another merciless blow of fate, which whipped him on the sides, on the back, all over his body along with the hated laughing light.

The end of cruelty. An end to anger. The prince felt himself lose all of it with a random sharp exhalation. Love remained in him, but it did not warm - it hurt. She killed. Slowly, painfully, almost infinitely long. In a way that no murderer, even the most cruel, can do. He was his own killer. He built the edifice of his life, crowning the top with his own death. He perceived any rustle now as if thousands of the most powerful cannons were firing over his ear.

He knew exactly what he was suffering for, but he kept asking himself the same question: "For what?"

Is it really never? Not even seconds? Even a pitiful moment of happiness? A huge wall between them, over which he will never get over. Not to run up, not to climb over. And not even destroy. An

absolute monolith, any touch to which tears to pieces an already dying heart.

"Or maybe?" he thought.

The prince jumped up from the ground, unsheathed his sword, turned the point towards him, and took a deep breath as he closed his eyes. It's as simple as that. One sharp blow to a fluttering heart and the end of torment! But maybe something awaits him next? Or will it be even worse than now? Although how could it be worse? Such pain could no longer be compared with anything. He was at his limit.

About a minute passed, and the Prince, unable to make the last movement, lowered his hands and dropped his sword. He cannot kill himself. A stupid feeling - it seemed to him that his time had not yet come. It was as if someone was standing next to him and telling him what to do. Why can't it be her?! What would have happened if she had been nearby? The Farah he had come to love. A sweet, beautiful face. Familiar... No! It will not be here. He lost her forever. He himself left, throwing a joking phrase with this strange word at parting. For some reason, he wanted to roar at the top of his voice: "Coccolucchia!" But instead, a wheezing came out of his throat, mixed with a set of barely audible sounds. And, of course, nothing happened. As much as he wanted to, the word was completely useless.

A shiver swept through his entire body. The whip that hit him every second accelerated and accelerated. And the Prince could not answer, could not stop suffering. He could only strengthen them. And even if he didn't want to, everything happened by itself, as if someone had decided everything for him a long time ago and just threw sharp stones at him, which cut through his soul, letting in the cold wind of despair, turning his heart into the same sharp shards, stained with blood and pain.

And the most terrible feeling, which the Prince came to terms with almost immediately, but it frightened him - he did not want to forget anything. As if it was not someone, but he himself who threw these stones at himself. The rainbow streak in his soul was now turning into a solid black spot, spreading over him, through his veins along with the blood, or maybe instead of it.

The prince was breathing heavily and erratically. Crazy pupils ran from side to side, hoping to cling to something, to distract themselves at least for a second. He hated himself for standing in front of Farah a few minutes ago, looking into her eyes, and looking perfectly calm. Why is that? Why couldn't he show her his pain, his love? He just stood there smiling. However, maybe he did everything right? After all, there was simply no other way. But he still hated himself. He could not find any reason for his torment except in

himself. And the Prince felt that no matter how strong they were, these sufferings would not kill him. Unfortunately, he turned out to be stronger than them. But as water wears away a stone, so they will torment it for the rest of his life.

He mercilessly tore his tattered sleeves - at least some release of energy accumulated in him. But it seems that this did not help at all. It seemed to the prince that this was just an excuse to alleviate his suffering and postpone the search for a new path. If he stays alive, he can't get away from it: he will have to look for a new road. Maybe he will have to carve a new path in his soul, but he will not be able to stand still. However, he will not be able to forget the old way. Neither forget, nor throw away - it will beckon him forever.

The prince picked up the abandoned sword, sheathed it behind his back, and wandered wistfully, looking around. Perhaps this fleeting calm that descended on him was only a short break, as if someone took pity on him and gave him a break before another storm.

A sense of freedom. It spread over his body like poison. Someone had poisoned him, adding pain to every movement, to every thought. What is it for, freedom? He couldn't find an answer. It just was, existed in his life. Useless, unnecessary. A huge wasteland under the firmament. He is free as a bird. But he felt nothing but disappointment. The prince will never be able to cope with this feeling in his chest. Pain, as if he had been deprived of something, hidden in an inaccessible place and not going to return. And in return, they left only emptiness.

His eyes stared indifferently at the sky. Everything that happened on the balcony turned into some kind of flash in his mind, compressed into one point. And this bright flash flashed before his eyes again and again. Almost non-stop, so often that it turned into a stream of bright blue light. The prince, somewhere in the depths of his mind, which now almost did not work, understood that he was delusional. Reality was mixed with something else. It seemed to him that he was going crazy. And with every second he only gets worse. Now all those seconds belonged to him. This one and the one behind it. And dozens of more. Hundreds, thousands, millions. Like raindrops, they would rain down on him endlessly in a merciless stream.

"If I could!"

Life has finally lost its color. Spot... a huge, black spot. Now you can't wash it off. You will have to live with it. They will have to live. How difficult it is to fight with yourself.

Unable to stop the flow of dark thoughts that tore at his mind, the Prince wanted nothing more than to immerse himself in the cool lake, so that they would slow down and freeze for a moment. He had

never experienced anything like it in his entire life, and he would never have believed that feelings and thoughts could hurt more than the deepest wound. The prince literally could not find a place for himself, did not see any way out. And because, as if in opposition to all this, he invented this lake, which would extinguish his thoughts. He didn't even know what it could look like, whether it had to be made of real water at all, or whether it simply couldn't exist, at least not in this world. Perhaps he could meet it in the world of pure ideas, where thoughts are material and bodies do not exist at all. But he imagined with delight how he was immersed in it, time stopped, thoughts went away and everything around him turned into silent, boundless serenity. Silence covers not only everything around him, but also reigns inside his head and he does not remember or hear anything. He ceases to care about anything, even for a few pitiful seconds.

Realizing that he saw no way out, the Prince stopped and suddenly remembered once again the word that Farah had told him:

"Kaccolucchia," he said faintly, this time controlling his voice.

And before he could finish speaking, he felt that the pleasant coolness of the water enveloped his body. The forest lake came out of nowhere, and he didn't even remember how he ended up in it. It was as if he had fallen through time. What if he just found it and dived, but did not immediately feel its life-giving effect, and for some time remained captive to his own gloomy thoughts? And no miracle happened, and he only lost their coherence?

In any case, immersing himself in this coolness finally gave him what he craved so much - freedom. From yourself, from circumstances, from mistakes made. And not for long, even from the feeling of losing something important and very strong. The fire of his thoughts was extinguished, to the very last ember. It will flare up again, with a vengeance, which will drive the Prince crazy again, but not now. He suddenly received answers to all his questions and felt in harmony with himself. Apparently, his mind simply could not bear this torture anymore and simply gave up. And the Prince just hung in the water, not seeing or hearing anything.

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When he came ashore, he felt like a different person. The prince threw off the heavy shackles and finally realized one simple thought: nothing, in fact, had happened. It was not real, in the end. Only his memories kept the reality that he had immensely regretted a few moments ago. But now he realized that his father was alive, and he himself could not make the fatal mistake a second time. And this even pleased him.

He tried not to think of Farah anymore. He managed to return to the camp when no one had yet noticed his absence. The Persian army was already beginning to prepare for battle, but the signal still did not arrive. Had the vizier deceived them? Tuammak ordered to set up a patrol around the camp and wait. Without a signal, there was no point in going on the attack.

A few days passed, but the situation did not change. Shahraman's army did not give away its presence in any way, but continued to wait for several more days before the decision was made at the war council to retreat and return to Persia. The path of the army still ran through Azad - Shahraman and his commanders took great care of their armies and wanted to give the soldiers a chance to rest and heal their wounds. Despite the modest success of the campaign, Shahraman believed that he was able to appease Rifat and present him with enough gifts and treasures. The prince was relieved to leave India with his army, knowing that the Sands were not nearby this time, and they would not be able to do any harm. And he had not the slightest idea of how his fate would turn out now. There was a huge field of opportunities ahead, he regained his normal life, although he was already a completely different person.

All the way back, the Prince seemed to be in oblivion, almost did not speak to his father or anyone else - he was afraid to break the pleasant feeling of emptiness and silence in his head. Heavy, gloomy thoughts would come back to him, of which he had no doubt, and so he took advantage of the moment, enjoying this serenity.

Chapter 2. Emerging Issues

It's only been a few hours since I wrote the first word in this book, and I already feel obsessed with it! If it weren't for a severe headache that made everything blur in front of my eyes, I wouldn't even take a break. Enough thoughts have accumulated in my head throughout my life. It would be better to share them with interested people, but I'm afraid there won't be any. My son, Nergal, my only hope, is unlikely to listen to me. Especially after what has just happened between us. Our relationship cannot be called enmity, but it no longer resembles the friendship of father and son. Like a father, I was ready to forgive him and even pretend to admit my guilt. But, this only made it worse. Now he is angry, realizing that he is wrong, and he is not able to openly admit it. He is even more annoyed that I am on the verge of death, and he still fights with me, not trying to fix anything, although, perhaps, it's about time. Young and hot-headed, he is unable to admit his mistakes to himself in the first place. Of course, I don't hold a grudge against him – it's just stupid and not fatherly. I'm sure he's not mad at me either, even though he's trying to show it in every possible way. Time will pass and everything will be different. But I will no longer be there. It is a pity that he does not share my faith in the perfection of death and the inevitability of fate.

Namtar's Journal Entry 2

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Since returning from India, the Prince has constantly felt that something oppresses him. His dreams were disturbing, sometimes he felt genuine horror. He could not find an explanation for this. It was clearly not related to the loss of Farah - he could feel the darkness approaching him. He did not understand its nature, did not imagine its form, but the feeling was such that every second it seemed that something was about to happen. In addition to fear, the Prince experienced something else - the same feeling, in the first moments after the discovery of the Sands of Time. The way they penetrated him, pulling something out of the depths of his soul. Something dark, cold... That which captures him from within, subordinates him to its will, like some monster that grew inside him. He remembered Farah's words as she said that a terrible beast lived inside the Sands. Perhaps it was he who ate it from the inside? Did it deprive you of your usual feelings, change your character, replace sensations and instill constant anxiety? What if this is a common imprint for a person who has come close to the Sands? Why then didn't he turn into a monster on that ill-fated night? Isn't he turning into it now? So many

questions haunted the Prince. Sometimes they swooped down on him like a swarm of wasps, and all that remained was to run. In his dreams, this swarm united into a dark spot and followed the Prince everywhere, it was impossible to hide anywhere. A second of respite - and again flight. And most importantly, the Prince did not know what to do with it. He knew so little about the Sands, he did not understand their nature at all. The only person who had an idea of them died. The traitorous vizier, Amar, killed by the hand of the Prince. He even had access to the magic of the Sands, he knew something about the dagger. Maybe he even imagined where these Sands came from and how they ended up in the treasury of the Indian Maharajah. Perhaps there was one more person, Farah's father, who could shed light on all these questions. But talking to him was simply an impossible task. After the failed battle for the city, the Persians left India, but the confrontation did not end. The two states were in a state of constant war, although there were few direct skirmishes. And Maharaja would rather die than tell something so important and intimate to the enemy.

Going through all the possible options in his head, the Prince could not sleep normally day by day, he was tormented by headaches. And the saddest thing was that he couldn't share it with anyone. He would have been taken for a madman, because the story he could tell was so incredible that no one in their right mind would believe in it. And his father did not see his son in battle and did not know what he was capable of. Sometimes it seemed to the Prince that all this was really just a dream and nothing really happened. But this could not be! He did not want to believe in such a scenario.

Man is a creature that is very strangely arranged. It would seem that the Prince managed to literally get away with it, correcting a grandiose mistake. He should have forgotten everything as soon as possible, like a bad dream, and enjoyed a normal life. Yes, he would have to come to terms with one inevitable loss, but at least she was alive! Farah's look before he died will be remembered forever. There were no accusations or resentment in it. Only piercing sadness, humility in the face of the inevitability and immense regret that everything ended this way. Now they are gone, his Farah is really dead. And from all these events, the Prince had only depressing memories. Days that never happened turned reality into a bad dream. One from which he could only be forgotten by a real dream, on those rare nights when he managed to fall asleep. But even here he was haunted by memories. Events were mixed into a strange mass of contradictory and seemingly fake images. Only one of them was real, as the Prince remembered it: a strange vision that revealed to him a sand cloud on the balcony near Rifat's throne room. But he did not remember him. Every time the Prince entered this cloud, he would

instantly wake up, and it didn't bring him any closer to solving the mystery.

The forgotten vision seemed important to the Prince even in Azad, it gave some strange hope, he looked for answers in it, and vague images promised a solution to all problems. In some miraculous way, it was supposed to explain everything, to connect all the threads and events together. Now the thirst for this knowledge increased three times and gnawed at the Prince day by day. And most of all he was tormented by the seeming proximity of the clue, he had only to stretch out his hand, feel his way in the void, and here it was, the answer! But he could not remember anything but strange orange spots and trembling air. And, in fact, he was becoming more and more distant from even those pathetic scraps of memories that he had of this vision. He forgot that he had seen some fountain, someone's face, and remembered only that somehow the Sands had miraculously healed his wounds. Knowing their true nature, he now thought it was incredibly strange and incomprehensible. But, as unpleasant as it was to realize, if he had a dagger now, he could at least try to remember something else. And then, would it turn out that the Sands would be useful to him?

All his thoughts boiled down to only one thing - he had to somehow bring everything back again. He must find a way to use the Sands again and, knowing what awaits him, try his luck again! A crazy idea that he didn't like at all. But the harder he drove it away, the harder it ate into his head. Meanwhile, he had no clues at all. Only a strange book in a language unknown to him. Not one of the learned men in all Babylon could tell the Prince what was written in it and what strange symbols were depicted on its first and last pages. The first had three elongated triangles that resembled elements of writing—wedges like those embossed with a stick on a tablet—which were outlined by a wide circular line. Two small rings were drawn on top of the line, and the whole symbol seemed to be stitched with an elongated sign, like a spire or a nail. The second depicted a crescent moon, with its ends turned downwards, above which there was a small circle. And both of them did not clarify anything at all related to the origin of the book itself and what was written in it.

On long evenings, and sometimes nights, when insomnia overwhelmed him more than usual, the Prince looked at its pages, each symbol, looking for at least some clue, a small clue. But in vain - the mysterious records continued to be stubbornly silent. In terms of writing style, they resembled someone's diary or a short chronicle. Or maybe a ship's log. But, perhaps, in the latter case, the paper would inevitably be stained with salt water, but the pages were clean. They were not even really worn out, and only a couple of corners were jammed, apparently from prolonged carrying in the pocket. The only

thing the Prince knew about it was that it belonged to the vizier, although it was of little value to him - he did not even try to get it back. Although, perhaps, only because he already knew it by heart? But it did not look like a book of spells or rituals - the records were too lengthy, divided into large blocks, of which the Prince counted about a hundred. At the beginning of these entries there were two lines that were crossed out for some reason. The last significant detail in the book was that two pages were torn out in front of the image of the second symbol. It was done quite carefully, but still not so much that you did not notice it when you look closely. What truth did someone who did this want to hide? What if they had the key to all these records? All this reminded the Prince again of his lost, forgotten vision, and he had placed the same hopes in it. He expected it to explain all the other events of those days, which were just as mysterious to him.

Meanwhile, as time passed, and as the Prince remembered and comprehended everything that had happened, he had more and more questions. His path from the throne room was filled with many strange encounters, inexplicable incidents, and unpleasant surprises. The sands themselves caused the least questions - their nature was more or less clear to the Prince, he felt it to the fullest, tasted the sweet fruit of forbidden knowledge and the bitterness of losing everything important and dear. But the way they influenced other people and the events they generated... Many things simply defied any explanation. For example, how did the vizier know so much about the Sands, why did they obey him, recognizing him as the master? What did he want to achieve by commanding them, by making such destruction and sacrifices? Or was it the Sands who ruled him, depriving him of his own will? The prince was extremely uncomfortable with this interpretation of Amar's motives. He was anything but a victim of circumstance. And yet, such an option was not completely excluded. The prince also noted that it was a great stroke of luck that the dagger never fell into the vizier's hands, apparently without it he could not use half of the power of the Sands of Time. It was definitely no coincidence that he was so eager to get his hands on it. What would have happened then? Although, perhaps, he did not want to know the answer to this question at all.

But, although the Sands only knew how to take life, once something completely different happened - Essen, who was killed in front of the Prince, suddenly came to life! But he no longer looked like himself, there was clearly something wrong with him! Their fight was very strange, he did not speak, as usual, straightforwardly, but on the contrary, in continuous riddles and innuendos. What was it all about? The Prince didn't even have time to ask him anything. At that moment, his mind was more occupied with Farah and what had

happened between them half an hour ago. He was overcome by strange visions and suspicions. It just disappeared, along with the dagger, and they didn't even have time to explain themselves. Which of all that happened was real and what was not? He remembered only her cheerful smile and tender kiss - could it be that they were not real? It was only now, as he pondered the incident with Essen, that the Prince remembered that he had also spoken of Farah. Despite all the accompanying oddities, it was quite in the spirit of Essen - to openly express distrust of a possible enemy.

The prince peered wistfully at the red desert painted by the sunset. He knew that he had another sleepless night ahead of him, new wanderings in the labyrinths of his own memory. He was a prisoner of his own mind, the past (if you could call it that) weighed on him. And time after time, he did not find answers, but only dug deeper and deeper, finding new details in his memories. And over time, he even stopped understanding whether they were true? The only answer to everything could only be... a repetition of this nightmare. The thought no longer seemed so repulsive and ridiculous to him. He clung to it as to a saving reed, knowing that in the morning, after a short and restless sleep, he would reject it again. For the umpteenth time.

Most likely, the Sands absorbed Essen, maybe not completely, but turning him into one of these monsters. But why didn't he turn into a monster himself? Sometimes it seemed to him that the Sands were so deep inside him that he was no different from the sand monsters. Darkness settled within him and did not go back even after sealing the Sands of Time.

Why did anyone create them at all? Did he know what he had begotten? Perhaps he was seeking eternal life? Well, in that case, the result he achieved was somewhat different from what he wanted. Eternal, but is it life? What joy is it to while away eternity as a sand monster? Which, as the Prince was convinced, could crumble into dust at any moment. Only the Sands themselves were eternal, but to become a part of them was hardly an enviable and desirable fate. And in the end, even though they were created for a good purpose, the Sands sowed only death and destruction around. I wonder what will happen to the world if they swallow it whole? From what the Prince had seen, he could only conclude that they were seeking to destroy not only all living things, but the entire material world. In the last hours of this nightmare, one particular city began to turn not just into ruins, but literally lost all outlines - the earth was disappearing from under his feet or soaring to the heavens.

The vizier also told the Prince something about Dahak. He was a powerful guardian of time, both meetings with whom did not bring him any harm. The first time he attacked the vizier himself - does it

mean that he also violated something? For example, his tricks with time and the sun – wasn't that what attracted and angered the beast? The second time he killed Essen and he died for the second time, it seems, completely, at that time. What was Dahaki's role in all this? What was his real purpose, apart from the vizier's false threats? Perhaps even that he would have been able to find out if he had returned to Azad that very night. And perhaps he will be able to leave this darkness in his soul somewhere out there, banish it back. Otherwise, what will she turn it into, settling in it for a long time? Other people were deprived of the memory of what had happened, but not him. The prince felt the Sands continue to seep into his soul through memories. And only a long crimson sunset gave him a strange hope that he could keep up with his vague goal, his unrealizable, almost stupid dream.

As stupid as trying to avoid it. For example, the Prince had imagined many times how he would sneak into Farah's chambers every night and tell her stories, one more incredible than the other. And she will listen to him with admiration, will not drive him away or call the guards. She will begin to trust him and maybe even open her heart to him again. And he will even believe in the very story, the only one that he did not invent. This will keep peace in his soul, bringing him closer to his dream. And hope will live until these stories run out, and he does not have to relive this whole nightmare. But each time he quickly realized how stupid and unrealistic it all was.

After seeing the sun off, the Prince went to his chambers, without much hope of a peaceful sleep, even though he was quite tired. His thoughts led him to a dead end again, he saw no way out, even despite his secret knowledge. It was useless, a force that only weighed him down and only made him weaker, literally draining all the juice out of him. At this moment, the Prince wanted only one thing: to swim again in that lake, which gave peace to his thoughts at least for a while.

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In the morning, the Prince felt a little relieved - his gloomy thoughts had dissipated during the part of the night that he had been asleep, and had not yet had time to gather over him again, like storm clouds. Shahraman was busy talking to the warlords - he still did not take the Prince seriously, although the Prince had asked many times to send him on a long voyage - and he was unable to talk to his father, so the Prince aimlessly headed for the gardens. The sight of greenery and blossoming trees brought peace to his thoughts, putting them in order, if only for a short time. The scents that hung in

the air reminded him of the childhood he had spent exploring these places far and wide. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon are the greatest of miracles, and even after so many years, he was very happy to live next to them and never ceased to be amazed at their beauty.

The midday heat was gradually coming into its own, and the Prince, a little tired from the long walk, sat down on a marble bench in the shade of a thick tree. The cold stone pleasantly froze his skin, even through his clothes, and the Prince decided to spend the next half hour here. Perhaps soon his father will be free, and they will be able to talk," the Prince decided to ask him about his mother. Having lost a loved one, he discovered new facets of feelings and realized that his father must have once experienced this terrible pain of loss. They would certainly have something to discuss, even though Shahraman did not know what was going on in the Prince's heart. But he was sure that he would be able to keep the conversation in the right direction and not raise unnecessary questions.

The prince leaned back and ran his hand over the stone. It was amazing how long he kept the coolness of the night! Every touch gave... And then a strange guess pierced the Prince like an arrow. All this time, he ran his hand over the bas-relief on the back of the bench, not seeing what was depicted on it. But he managed to feel its shape with his hands. I think it was..." The prince jumped up from his seat and looked at his find - the very symbol, from the first page of the book! A cuneiform sign in a circle, with two rings at the bottom. The resemblance was not distant, but stunningly close, literally one to one! Why had he never seen it before? But, perhaps, he was really well hidden from prying eyes, even the most inquisitive ones.

But where did it come from here? The symbol definitely didn't appear overnight or even a month ago! He urgently needs to talk to someone. And without wasting a minute, the Prince rushed to the palace to question his father's elders and advisers, including the chief of them, with the title of "Eye of the King." But everything was again to no avail - each of them shrugged his shoulders, looking at the relief drawing. The prince literally led everyone who could be useful in any way by the hand into the garden, forcing them to pay attention to their find. He gave each of them a book with the same symbol in his hands and did not let go for a long time, pestering them with questions. When there was no one left in the entire palace to help him, the Prince went to the city and spent three days in the streets of Babylon, clinging to every chance. He talked with many elders, guardians of the city, visiting merchants, judges, heads of the oldest and most revered families in the city, and even with completely random people. But all in vain. Centuries of wisdom and experience did not allow the whole city to answer, in fact, a single question.

Babylon was powerless to help the Prince, and the thought of returning that very night again seemed so unfortunate to him. If he couldn't find the answer here, he would definitely find it elsewhere!

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The confrontation with India intensified, and Shahraman spent all day in meetings with his generals and military advisers. He seldom had a moment's rest until nightfall, and the Prince had not been able to speak to him for a long time. It was unlikely that his idle questions could be more important than state affairs - the Prince understood this very well. But now, after his unexpected discovery, he was constantly looking for a meeting with his father. He did not hope to know the answers, he only wanted to say goodbye to him. If an entire city, dazzling in its grandeur Babylon, cannot give it answers, then it has no place here, and it will find the answer elsewhere. In addition, the Prince feared that he would soon be involved in some way or another in an open war with the Indians, and this was the last thing he wanted.

Their meeting took place at sunset, when Shahraman, tired of many days of advice and constant thoughts, went out onto the wide balcony just to watch the sunset. The prince, who was standing behind him, was silent for several minutes and did not dare to approach. He thought that he had inherited this strange habit of gazing into the evening from his father. And that he would have to lie.

"Good evening, father," the Prince said at last. His voice trembled, and Shahraman noticed it. But he misinterpreted. Of course, he noticed that something had been oppressing the Prince for many weeks and thought that he must have decided to talk about it. Shahraman believed that the Prince was probably very sorry that he had not been able to prove himself in a real battle and that he was cramped in this city.

"Greetings, son," Shahraman replied with a sigh. He did not know where to start this conversation.

–What is going on? You spend days at military councils. Is everything so serious? The Prince began. He did not go straight to the topic that interested him most.

"I'm glad you asked." Our invasion had enormous consequences. The enemy has retained his strength and is thirsty for revenge. It is pointless to attack the Persian Empire - in open battle my army has no equal. But the Indians have chosen a different tactic: every now and then revolts break out on the outskirts, in the most rebellious regions. Their detachments are almost elusive, but a chain of

seemingly insignificant events leads to the collapse of the king's power in all the outlying satrapies! Shahraman said in response.

He prepared a proposal for the Prince, which, in his opinion, was intended to interest and encourage his son.

"And what do you plan to do?" The Prince asked.

"Send a squad of warriors there who know how to conduct covert defense. Inconspicuous, strong and incredibly hardy. And, most importantly, I want you to be part of this squad! Shahraman told him. He had been nurturing this idea for a long time and knew that the Prince had enough talents to cope with such a task and even succeed in it.

–I? But...," the Prince drawled in surprise.

–Of course! I see you languishing here in the city. And your first chance to show yourself in battle was missed. Now you can make up for it with ease," Shahraman explained.

"Perhaps," the Prince said uncertainly, thinking of something of his own. He really wanted to make up for lost time, but his father had no idea that he and his son meant completely different things.

Shahraman, who took the Prince's mixed reaction as a positive response, added:

"You're leaving in a couple of days, after sunset." The horses are ready, and my servants will help you gather the most necessary things. In addition, you can choose any sword from my collection. Or even two, I don't know what your fighting style is, it's up to you to decide.

The prince listened to his father, but some of the words floated past him. He did not quite expect such a turn of events, but he saw certain advantages in it - he would not (practically) have to lie and arrange an escape. But, in the end, his goal will be completely different.

Shahraman, meanwhile, continued to tell the details of the upcoming campaign:

"Haraz, one of my nobles, will go with you. He is a master of negotiating on the ground and achieving his goal by cunning or force. Such a person will definitely be useful to you. He will also decide how you should act in any of the situations. You will meet the rest of the squad on the spot, during the journey.

The prince, finally distracted from his thoughts, asked his father:

"Why are you taking such unusual measures?"

"My enemies expect from me what they are used to - Persia has always responded to any threat with force. But now it's time for military and diplomatic tricks. I would like to protect my empire and people at all costs. Therefore, it is you and people like you that I entrust with such a complex and unusual mission," Shahraman explained.

"And then what is Babylon for you?" The Prince asked.

"He is the heart of my country, and as long as it beats, Persia will live. But the heart will not be healthy if the other parts are sick," Shahraman replied.

"With such love for him, you must know every corner of him?" You ordered the laying out of the hanging gardens, you began the construction of the great Tower of Babel, you...," The prince tried to change the subject.

"Oh, you're a little mistaken!" Babylon is so much bigger than me or you. And noticeably older than all of us. This is a very ancient city, and I did not order these gardens to be planted. Once they were partially destroyed, and I only restored them, making them a little more beautiful. But the beginning of all this was laid long before me. The same, by the way, applies to the tower - it has been built for more than the first hundred years, some elders still call it a man-made mountain. I only know the legend that when it is completed, then any misfortunes and troubles will bypass Babylon. No one and nothing will dare to harm this truly great miracle!

The prince was very surprised by what he heard, but, on the other hand, it clarified a lot. Now he understood why no one in the whole city knew the answer to his question. Those people died long ago and took all the secrets with them. He could only hope that he would find the place from which they came; find at least some traces left by them.

And then Shahraman, without any questions from the Prince, suddenly said:

"Only your mother I loved more than this city...

The prince turned and looked at his father. The latter was looking distantly into the distance.

"What was she like, father?" The Prince asked half a minute later. He had not expected that this conversation would take place at all, and now he was also surprised at the response it had made in his soul.

From Shahraman it was clear that the previous words were not easy for him, but, nevertheless, he answered:

"I was ready to conquer half the world for her.

"And you would do anything to protect her?" The Prince continued to ask, feeling his emotions boil in him, making his voice tremble.

"Anything," his father replied to him with a tear in his voice.

"Would you like to get her back?" Unable to stop, the Prince asked again.

There was a pause. Shahraman could not restrain himself, and a miserly tear ran down his cheek. The prince noticed this and heard the only possible answer:

"Even if I had to turn back time and turn the whole world upside down, yes! There is no madness that I would not dare to bring her back... But I...

His voice cracked in the middle of the sentence. But the Prince heard everything he wanted. These words drove the last drop of hesitation out of him. He did not share his father's feelings so much, because he did not even see his mother, but he understood them perfectly, because he felt the same way about Farah. How is it possible that the nightmare that he experienced, the worst moments of his life, turned out to be at the same time the best, the most desired?

"Good-bye, father!" And no more words are needed, you have said enough," the Prince finally squeezed out. This last confession of his father was indeed quite enough for him to finally see clearly his insane goal and go for it.

"Goodbye," Shahraman replied, not daring to reveal the terrible secret. He only knew that he was unlikely to be able to sleep today. But in this case, their fates were similar - both were to blame for the death of a loved one.

Chapter 3. A shadow of the past

Attacks recur more and more often... An unbearable buzz in my head, weakness in my arms and legs, and then it darkens in front of my eyes and I lie in semi-oblivion for a long time. I never slept that night. The throbbing pain in his temples simply did not allow him to do this.

Namtar's Journal, Entry 3

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The company left Babylon on the appointed day, as soon as the night cast shadows on the desert sands and the coolness permeated the hot air. Almost no one in the city knew about the real goals of the company and about everyone who was part of it - the travelers left Babylon separately and only after that they met at the agreed place. And even more so, no one guessed about the real goals of the Prince himself. But he was going to postpone the implementation of his plan for a while - he could not simply leave the detachment and disobey his father. He had to choose the moment, the opportunity. And to do this, it was first necessary to take a closer look at the situation and get used to a new life.

The detachment moved at night, escaping from the heat of the day and keeping their movements secret. During the day, travelers took refuge in caves, rocks or abandoned dwellings. Haraz was sometimes absent and sometimes absent for several days. He acted according to the only plan known to him and everyone preferred not to ask unnecessary questions - he was their guide and commander, appointed by Shahraman himself. And several times his sorties literally saved the lives of the members of the squad - by this he also earned their respect, nullifying all doubts and suspicions.

Of all the soldiers, the Prince was the most friendly with a warrior named Iman. He was in his mid-thirties, much more experienced than the Prince, though he didn't have the same agility and fighting technique. Iman had been through many battles, and relied not only on his combat skills, but on all his experience in general—he had some kind of flair for choosing a path. He told the Prince about past battles, they trained in battles very close to the present - unless there was a danger that the noise would betray them.

Iman often lacked the eloquence to make his stories truly vivid. Moreover, the Prince sometimes felt that his thoughts were much richer, it was simply difficult for him to put them into verbal form. Sometimes his comrade-in-arms managed to successfully use the line

of conversation and tell a little more than just about the next battle. It was as if he was trying to sum up his life, the path that he had passed, although he still managed to do it quite clumsily. According to him, going through battle after battle, it was as if he was one step closer to some great goal that pursued him in his dreams, but did not have any clear form. As soon as he got close enough to see her, a bright light obscured everything around him and he woke up. This mystery tormented him somewhat, but he was determined to continue on his way and not to turn away from it.

Another trait inherent in Iman was the desire to kill people as rarely as possible. He preferred victories of a different kind, when it was enough to intimidate or persuade the enemy, turning the situation in his favor. Well, or, at least, wound, but not fatally. However, when there was a need for murder, his hand never wavered and he never doubted anything. "So this is my way," he believed.

Madid and Naysir, who were often absent with Haraz, kept aloof more than the others. They were a kind of bodyguard, shadowing their master. Upon their return, they preferred not to talk much about the details of the next sortie, reporting only the most necessary. During the journey, being in the detachment, they were extremely taciturn and even communicated with each other quite rarely.

When the travelers reached the first point of their route, the detachment was divided into several parts, living underground with people loyal to Persia, making sorties to kill rebels or Indian infiltrators who sowed trouble. Over time, the Prince understood his father's motives and why he secretly sent such a small detachment instead of a large army. The appearance of the Persian army could have played the opposite effect and intensified popular unrest. The locals preferred to live in such a way that they were practically not touched - few of them recognized Shahraman as their king, and Persia as their country. Therefore, the squad continued to move from city to city, removing unnecessary people, resolving local conflicts and still not proving themselves. Most often, no one even suspected their presence.

Haraz disappeared for more and more time and over time almost disappeared altogether, appearing no more than once every two or three months. Instead of himself, he sent Navid - he, in a sense, joined the detachment about six months later and was one of the locals. He aroused no suspicion in anyone, pretending to be either a vagabond or a mercenary, but in fact he was loyal to Babylon. The news he brought to the squad was always good—he would either tell them about the success of another covert operation or the next point on their route. No one knew where he spent the rest of his time, but Haraz personally convinced everyone that Navid could be trusted as

much as he was himself. One day, the Prince overheard a fragment of their conversation, from which he realized that Navid was making a name for himself and Haraz had promised him to put in a word for him. This opened the way for him to Babylon, the city of his dreams. And perhaps that is why he continued to do his duty with special zeal and found a way to bring the next good news even when it was almost impossible.

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Over time, even Navid began to show himself very rarely. The detachment almost did not move and there was a certain stagnation in its life. The days passed aimlessly and the soldiers languished with melancholy. Over time, they decided to split up and open themselves up to people. Appearing in groups of two or three people, they did not arouse much suspicion and discontent. They tried not to stay anywhere for long, hiding behind stories of trifling errands from Babylon - everywhere they were immediately recognized as strangers. They agreed on a certain route, so that at least one person always stayed where Navid or Haraz could return.

The prince quickly realized that this was the chance he had been waiting for. The fuse had not yet faded in him, the craving for solving a strange mystery that had been entangling all the events for a year, by that time. He continued to endlessly study the diary that he kept with him everywhere. The prince hid him from prying eyes and told about him only to Iman. But he did not show any particular interest - for him it was only a faded and yellowed echo of a dead, long-gone era, which had no influence on the present in any way - and the Prince avoided this topic in the future. However, he himself was looking for people at every opportunity, not forgetting the safety of the detachment, who could show him the way, give him at least some hint. In the first year, he sometimes managed to get into abandoned temples and sanctuaries, the walls of which were dotted with some obscure writing. But none of them even remotely resembled those from the book. Now that he was practically on his own, he could spend all his time searching. Like Navid and Haraz, he began to disappear from the squad's sight more and more often, blindly following a ghostly, hazy dream.

But in addition to these strange motives, he was driven by something else. The prince knew that the time would come when the confrontation with India would escalate into a real war that would take many lives. All the actions of the Indians were just a screen, a decoration for preparing for a real war, albeit not a quick one. And he did not want it at all, realizing that the way back would be forever lost, he would not be able to return his beloved and his life would

turn into a nightmare again. He believed that their friendship could end this war, and they would be able to convince both sides to form an alliance. Together. But for this to happen, the Prince will really need to turn back the clock and turn the whole world upside down, just to get a chance to fix everything on that ill-fated day. This bridge between the past and the future was his only hope for a benign outcome of events. It turned out that even though he had canceled the events of those days in Azad, they were not really over and their consequences were still haunting him.

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The prince wandered from city to city, from village to village. He came across lodges, abandoned settlements, cemeteries, ruins. Sometimes he stumbled upon ancient caves, half covered with sand, on the walls of which there were some drawings and even inscriptions. But it was impossible to read them – they were the dead languages of the lost peoples. It was not only the darkness that followed him that drove the Prince forward. A legend, or even a shadow of it, a small fragment of decayed memories. He felt a strange attraction to this mystery, as if the whole meaning of his life lay in finding answers to the questions it posed to him. The mystery was some kind of thin thread between understanding what was happening to the Prince and the Sands. His life depended on this riddle, which he had been trying to assemble like a mosaic for several years - and all in vain. Each time he lacked some kind of general vision, a complete picture. Everything crumbled into small incoherent pieces. Tales, legends, stories, strange symbols and bizarre fables - all this was in the air, but immediately melted away and ran away as soon as you approached.

Darkness haunted him now in his dreams. It was still formless, but it was so terribly cold that even the midday heat could not instantly shake the Prince's shivers when he woke up from another disturbing dream. A dream he never remembered. He had long forgotten about being in a good mood, and his face was gloomy and cold. He preferred to hide it under a large cloak, which also hid his weapons and warrior's robes. His life was more like the path of a hermit, it tempered him, made him harsh and even cruel. Over time, he stopped hesitating, killing enemies quickly and cold-bloodedly. He never looked for fun in this, doing it only for defensive purposes or for the sake of achieving some important goal. He himself literally became a shadow. Deadly and dangerous.

For a long time, the Prince traveled along the borders with India, but over time he began to make forays deep into it. There, too, he came across many places that were abandoned – temples,

settlements, caves – everything that could serve as a shelter and abode for a person, his faith and his knowledge. But time after time, he was disappointed. Not a single clue, not a single hint. Everyone who came across him and was not hostile to him only shrugged their shoulders, hardly understanding what the Prince was asking them, although by that time, after three years from the day of his departure from Babylon, he had managed to master the Indian language sufficiently. Over time, he began to understand that he was moving in the wrong direction, although before that he believed that if Peski was with the Indian Maharajah, then at least at the level of some rumors or legends, fragments of important information should reach him. But India, like all the wise men of Babylon, was dumb and indifferent.

Sometimes the prince came up with the idea of sneaking into the princess's chambers again and asking her about everything. But this time, she would immediately call for help, and everything would turn out not in favor of the Prince. And there was no way he could convince Maharaja of the reality of his story. At best, he would have ended up in prison, where he would have spent the rest of his life. Yes, Farah probably remembers that the vizier turned out to be a traitor, but she also managed to understand who the enemy of her country was. Consequently, this path was closed to him.

Over time, the Prince began to realize that his feelings with Farah flared up unusually quickly, perhaps even too quickly. Now, years later, all shades faded, and the fire in his heart faded, turning into a hazy memory, sometimes even tormenting the Prince. What happened between them? Getting closer in the face of danger, just in spite of the circumstances, or a real feeling? What if it was the Sands that had awakened something in their hearts that they had misinterpreted? Could something similar have happened under other circumstances?

All these thoughts, however, did not weigh on the Prince, but rather flowed in the background, by themselves. The life of a wanderer has changed him too much, and there is almost no room for feelings like love in his soul. He thought soberly and coldly, something predatory appeared in his gaze. And the only reason he was still thinking about Farah was because he saw something special about her. Somehow, she hadn't turned into one of the sand monsters. And her life remained the only key to ending the ever-growing confrontation between their countries. And even if he no longer had any of the feelings that filled his heart in those days, he must try again to save her. But will he be able to do it if his heart has already decayed and faded?

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All these years, the Prince was not completely alone. He didn't know it, of course, but the Ghost followed him everywhere in the company of his faithful friend, Jatta. Two unseen beings accompanied the Prince on his every journey. The ghost wanted to tell him many things, to tell him the truth and show him the way. And he spent all his time, all the eternity given to him, trying to shout to the Prince. But that was the fate of the Ghost - to always remain silence, absolute silence. He could only observe. However, to come to terms with this, it will take him seven years to follow the Prince on his heels. Of course, he felt time in a completely different way, and for him it rushed by more like an instant. But even he left his imprint on the Ghost's thoughts, introducing him to such a concept as humility. It seems that he will forever remain a voiceless breath of wind, unable to whisper anything to anyone even in his sleep. He did not feel as lonely as the Prince, because he had a loyal friend, but still the barrier between him and the world of living people weighed on him. After all, the possibilities that eternity opened up for him were truly amazing: he existed as if outside of time and chose for himself how it flows. He didn't fully understand how this mechanism worked yet, but it didn't bother him much now. He only continued to glide like a shadow behind the Prince, marveling at the persistence and assertiveness of fate that pushed him onto the path prepared for him in advance. The ghost could not influence him in any way. Only one thing he knew for sure was that the search for the Prince would be crowned with success, if such an outcome could be called that. And this success will be the first step towards the inevitable death of the Prince. He will not be able to carry out his plans completely and will simply disappear in the abyss of the Sands of Time.

It's hard to say what exactly drove the Ghost to follow the Prince everywhere. What exactly did he want to find, see or understand? And why would he do it if he knew how it would end? Perhaps he had become attached to the Prince, imbued with sympathy for his fate? Or did he still cherish the hope of finding a bridge between the worlds, an invisible secret path that he had groped for, but immediately missed during the events in Azad?

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At the end of the fourth year after the Prince left Babylon, he was completely disappointed in his search. In any case, in the direction he chose. No matter how much he waited for that day, he would have to return to Babylon. Except that he could continue his search in its vicinity. Mesopotamia could still hold the memory of ancient peoples, including the one in whose language the diary was

written. But the Prince was afraid to admit to himself that he did not want to return. He was afraid that this return would turn into new mental anguish for him, which he had forgotten. He learned to live differently, he practically erased the past from his memory. His goal had lost its meaning, it was only a conditional reason not to stop still. And the Prince went to her rather by inertia, out of habit, losing everything that really moved him along the way.

But the day when he turned his horse back and rushed towards Babylon still came. It was not something special, full of fateful decisions or revelations. It was a simple inevitability. The Prince, like the Ghost, had learned humility and had become accustomed to the idea that he would never achieve his goal. Of course, he wasn't going to give up right away and would spend a lot more time searching the length and breadth of his native land, but he was prepared in advance for defeat. After all, he was pursuing the goal of a completely different person. Someone he himself had not been for a long time.

These years really tempered the Prince and his character. He became a warrior in the full sense of the word. He was dangerous both in open battle and in a secret, covert attack. None of his opponents were lucky enough to survive if the Prince really wanted him dead. Over time, there were even rumors about a mysterious and mysterious hermit warrior, whom hardly anyone wanted to meet. The rumors, of course, were not true in everything, but they fully conveyed the general meaning. The prince was described as an incredibly agile and strong fighter, who perfectly wielded edged weapons. Few of those who saw his blades up close could tell of him. They described his swords as two cold fangs that cut through the air faster than an arrow and were decorated with the heads of a lion and an eagle on the hilts. His movements were light and fast, like the wind, but at the same time powerful and incredibly accurate.

For such a long time, the Prince really managed to hone his fighting skills almost to perfection. He literally got used to his weapon and during the fight he seemed to become one with these swords. They were like an extension of his body, a kind of fangs or claws, like a beast. In addition, partly by himself, and partly with the help of the craftsmen he met, he completely remade his costume. The clothes of an ordinary Persian soldier did not give him the necessary freedom and lightness. In addition, they had many weak and ill-conceived details, vulnerabilities. His costume consisted of light chest plates tied with many straps. His forearms and the backs of his hands were protected in a similar way, while his shoulders were left bare to allow freedom of movement of his arms. The same applied to the legs - spacious light trousers and nothing superfluous, except for armor that protected the lower leg and knees. Shoes were made so

that sand practically did not get inside, but at the same time they were easily removed when just a pair of straps that tightened the armor on the shins were relaxed. In addition, developing his own special style of sword fighting, the Prince came up with the idea of placing a special support for blades on the elbows. At the right moment, they did not allow the swords to move and allowed the Prince to perform the dance of death, turning their hilt towards the enemy.

Of the details of his costume that were not of a protective nature, it was worth noting the sweeping sash - a large canvas of fabric, tightened with a belt for reliability. Most often, he used red fabric, because he used it to dress wounds, tearing off a flap. Over time, it ran out, and he changed it to a new canvas.

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The prince spent about three more years wandering. His search was still fruitless, and he was driven only by alarming rumors that India was accumulating forces for a powerful attack. Years later, there could indeed be a danger that the enemy's forces would become large enough to pose a serious threat.

Meanwhile, the stories about the mysterious desert warrior reached Babylon, to the ears of Shahraman himself, and he understood who he was most likely talking about. About his son, with whom he said goodbye seven years ago and since then he has heard almost nothing about him. He knew that his squad had made some progress, but then the thread was broken and all the search that followed was a failure - the Prince disappeared without a trace. Shahraman refused to believe that he was dead. He knew that his son was alive, but he had some reason to hide. The Tsar was firmly convinced that the Prince would one day return and be worthy of the proud title of heir to the throne.

But the looming threat loomed so close that Shahraman was forced to equip a new detachment to search for the Prince. In the coming war, he assigned him a special role. And, besides, every good warrior was worth its weight in gold, and the Prince was worth ten or even a hundred, if even half of the rumors about him were true.

When his father's will reached his ears, the Prince knew that the time had come, and it was time to stop chasing the mirage. Any hope finally melted and turned to dust. He turned halfway to the next point of his route and with a light heart left the past to burn out in a night fire in the middle of the desert.

On the way, the Prince unexpectedly met Navid. He hardly recognized him, but the most important thing did not change: he was bringing the good news to Babylon. The Indian army was not yet

strong enough and the war was postponed for at least another six months. The prince could not help but rejoice at this, but he was determined not to deviate from the intended path and accompanied Navid to Babylon. Together they came to Shahraman and Navid told his news. The king listened to him and said:

"Thank you for such good news. Haraz told me about you, and I think you deserve your place in my army, Naveed!

A smile shone on his face, he bowed low to the king and left the throne room with the assembled military commanders. He was now at their disposal, and they would find him a worthy place in the ranks of the Persian army. His dream came true.

The prince and Shahraman were left alone and had a long conversation until late at night. The father took his son back and appointed him commander of one of the armies. Postponing the war did not mean that you could relax and not prepare for it. Fate gave them a great chance, and they had to use it wisely.

In the morning, Shahraman announced his decision to everyone and ordered to begin full-scale preparations. He expected to attack India before it was ready to strike first. If everything goes according to plan, then one major battle should decide the course of the entire war. The prince was ready for this, and the past finally left his thoughts. Perhaps it should be burned, and not heated under the water column.

Chapter 4. War

I think my time has come. This is already unbearable. Soon I won't even be able to walk. Perhaps this night or the next day.

It's a pity that I have time to leave so little behind me. That I can't make friends with my son anymore. Nergal, if you happen to be reading this, please forgive me! Remember that I have always loved you and did not seek to leave you as soon as possible. But fate is inevitable, it cannot be changed, and I feel its call! Forgive me!

I think I'll leave this journal on my desk before I go to the Abyss and finish my life. I hope that when I die, I will not remember him. I will not look for a pen and a piece of paper to pour out everything that worries me.

Although it is a pity that there is no connection between the two worlds. Even the smallest one, like this diary. Oh, if I could add a single line a century, I am sure that it would one day be the greatest source of wisdom. But, I have already done everything I can. Therefore, I hope that I will be able to find peace.

I'm afraid again...

Namtar's Journal, Entry 4

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Navid's merits were appreciated, and he was appointed to the king's army, and not as an ordinary soldier, but as the commander of a small detachment, such as the one with which the Prince had gone to the border with India seven years earlier. This detachment was part of the army commanded by the Prince and was supposed to be engaged in intelligence and covert operations, among other tasks. It was prescribed to engage in open battle only in case of special necessity or inevitability.

Shahraman's army was preparing for war. Soldiers trained intensively, commanders and generals thought over plans and strategies. The date for the advance of the Persian forces was set by them in three months. By this time, all the necessary preparations will be completed, weapons and supplies will be collected, and the season of moderate weather will come, when the heat of the day will not affect the well-being of the armies so much.

The prince spent all day long with his father and the rest of the military leaders. Now he was one of them and had to delve into all the intricacies of this craft. From now on, he was responsible not only for himself - the Prince commanded an entire army. And their lives and the success of the battle depended on how he would lead people. All this was very contrary to his habit of a lonely life, when he

decided only for himself. Then he knew exactly what and how to do, he could come out victorious from the situation even when it was almost impossible. But now, very little depended on his fighting skills. Except that the way the Prince fought could raise the morale of the soldiers of his army. By his example, he inspired them, giving them strength and courage. But this was not enough. Wars are not won by the brave.

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Like a bolt from the blue, the news was heard by Haraz, who suddenly appeared right in the middle of the war council one day, about a month after the beginning of preparations for war. He entered the hall, examined the generals around him and turned to Shahraman:

"Rumors are deceptive, my king. Indians are already on our doorstep!

Exclamations of surprise and indignation were heard, whispers crept through the hall. Shahraman was silent for a long time, answering Kharaz nothing. He still trusted him, but the change was too sudden. Without giving free rein to his emotions, he asked dryly:

–How many?

"Two weeks, no more, my king," said Haraz.

Absolute silence hung in the hall.

"But didn't you send Navid with the news of the six-month delay?" The Prince finally said.

"It's a mistake, a misunderstanding! I didn't have time to give him the latest information, and then I found myself in a situation from which I could not quickly extricate myself.

"Bring Navid to me!" Shahraman ordered.

"Wait, father," the Prince interjected. "This is a soldier of my army, and if you want something, then talk to me!"

Haraz looked at the Prince in surprise. He only now realized that he was at this council for a reason. Shahraman significantly promoted him, appointing him commander of an entire army. However, after quickly assessing the situation, Haraz dismissed his surprise and accepted the new situation as a given.

Meanwhile, all eyes were now fixed on Shahraman. The prince behaved quite boldly, daring to contradict the king. But he was still his son and only heir, and no one even dared to predict the reaction of the tsar.

– A worthy answer. It is for your cold mind that I appointed you commander," Shahraman finally said, adding: "Follow his example!

"Well, in that case, let him advise us what to do?" One of the generals shouted, dissatisfied with the Tsar's answer and not sharing

the Prince's trust in Navid. He suspected that the latter's message might have been deliberately erroneous.

"We're moving out in a week. I know the desert and the mountains like the back of my hand, and I can guide you," the Prince replied without waiting for Shahraman's words.

He only listened to his son's proposal and nodded affirmatively, once again convinced of his decision. At this point, the council was over - it was time to move on to more important and urgent matters.

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After the news from Kharaz, the preparation of the army began to boil with triple strength. Troops flocked to Babylon from all over Persia. A huge camp was set up near its walls - even such a city was not able to accommodate such a large number of people. Shahraman's army was incredibly large, but without proper organization, timely delivery of supplies, and other problems, it could collapse completely. And therefore the greatest attention was paid to providing the troops with everything necessary and planning movements.

After the arrival of Haraz, Navid's position was greatly shaken. Even though the Prince defended and justified him, people began to treat him with distrust and, at times, even contempt. Someone even considered him a traitor who planned to expose Persia to a sudden blow from the enemy. But no one resorted to open threats and attacks, mostly everything was limited to conversations behind Navid's back. He felt the general mood of the people towards him and waited for the start of the campaign - he was supposed to distract everyone and give him a chance to prove his loyalty to Persia. Interestingly, at the same time, Haraz was in no hurry to stand up for him and whitewash his name. Perhaps he was too afraid for his own reputation, or simply did not consider the incident worthy of attention. He was busy preparing for the campaign all day long, receiving several dozen messengers, scouts and ambassadors from different parts of Persia a day. His knowledge was valuable, and Shahraman gave Haraz a certain amount of leeway, knowing that he was acting in the interests of the empire.

Iman got into Navid's detachment - the Prince found him and personally invited him to his army. A proven comrade-in-arms gave him confidence, and he regretted that he could not recruit a whole army of soldiers like him. He either did not know the other members of the squad well enough or lost sight of them. And Naysir and Madid remained Haraz's bodyguards. The prince highly appreciated their fighting skills, but he could not get them into his army.

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The armies moved separately from each other, in a coordinated order, constantly maintaining communication through messengers. The Prince's army was in the vanguard - he led, as promised, the army of Shahraman behind him. The years he spent as a hermit were not in vain, and he learned to navigate and survive in the desert, even in its most unfriendly areas. At the end of the path, it was planned that the Prince would slow down and all the armies would come together for a coordinated attack.

But, apparently, there are plans to collapse or not come true at all. On the third week of the journey, the sentinels brought the Prince the news that the Indian army had entered Persia and was moving to meet him. Along the way, they met practically no resistance from the locals, playing on the latter's hatred of the Babylonian authorities. The prince had to deploy his army in order to reunite with the main Persian forces as soon as possible. There was no more than one day left before the collision.

The prince returned with the news to his father, who was marching with the rest of the army and the commanders of the other armies. He told him everything he knew about the place where the battle was likely to take place—it was familiar to the Prince, and the Persian soldiers could take advantage of their position by occupying the heights and preparing for battle. At the end of a heated discussion of further plans, Shahraman called one of the servants to him, whispered something in his ear and handed him a package. He meekly nodded and hurried away. None of those present except Haraz noticed this.

No commander in his right mind would lead his armies to attack at night. But Shahraman expected any insidiousness and madness from the Indians. After all, to invade Persia and challenge its power was in itself madness. But Maharaja was embittered by that attack seven years earlier and the murder of his brothers. He returned to the path from which he left long ago. That is why several guards were posted at different distances from the main camp, ready to give an alarm signal at any moment.

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The battle began at dawn - during the whole night there was not a single attempt to break through the cordon or arrange a surprise attack, taking the Persians by surprise. The Maharaja and his armies were not famous for any special cunning and tactics of battle. He preferred brute force, acting tough and decisive. A huge number of warriors came under his banners. It seemed that his army obscured

the entire horizon and outnumbered the Persians. The battle promised to be epoch-making, and the further fate of both states depended on its outcome.

The armies of the Maharajah, in addition to the usual spearmen, swordsmen and archers, consisted of special detachments that controlled ballistae, cannons and other devices. The Persians could oppose them with mounted platoons and high mobility due to light armor and confident knowledge of the terrain.

Like two elements, the armies of the opponents met in a fierce duel to the death. Metal tore flesh, hundreds of bodies fell to the sand, and more and more warriors ran over them. The ground turned red, and the air was literally saturated with pain and screams of death. Unbearable noise and confusion reigned on the battlefield, so much so that for a long time it was not clear on which side the advantage was. The Indians fought like beasts, the Maharaja's approach was really noticeable – the methods were harsh, no mercy. The only goal is to destroy the enemy's manpower, mortify his flesh and suppress any opposition. He was literally ready to throw corpses at the enemy and ordered not to weaken the pressure even for a moment. The two predators grabbed each other's throats and tried to be the first to finish off their bleeding rival.

The battle was almost uncontrolled. Endless cruelty everywhere, exhausting fights and no chance to last long enough. Even the Prince was at the limit of his capabilities. His horse was killed in the very first minutes of the battle and he had no choice but to get bogged down in the battle. Navid's detachment was also drawn into the battle - against his will and despite his real purpose. The war spared no one and asked no one for permission. She was a monster with two jaws, devouring two armies that voluntarily fled into them.

The prince tried his best to protect his comrades-in-arms and exterminated Indian soldiers one by one, by the dozens, and by the end of the day the count had reached hundreds. Years of training had turned him into a killing machine, he was one of the few who was able to surprise his opponent and counter him with something more intimidating. At one point, the Prince rescued the wounded Navid and then fought alongside Iman, who nearly attacked him in the heat of battle. And there was no number of deaths around them, but the streams of Indians did not dry up. But then from the hills came a signal that no one expected - to retreat! The Persians obeyed the order and, suffering heavy losses, began to retreat to their original positions. No one understood what was happening, but this, for a while, lowered the morale of the Persian army. Is the enemy winning? But then what is the point of such a difficult retreat?

The Maharaja and his army, on the contrary, were inspired by this and began to press with a vengeance. The Indian ruler was

confident of his imminent victory. But in the meantime, without much noise and without any warning, the wave of Persian troops rushed in the opposite direction. From the far ranks to the front line, inspiring news swept through. At the same time, the soldiers of Persia huddled in small groups, leaving free passages - another army, consisting entirely of cavalry detachments, rushed from the rear to meet the enemy. Shahraman kept it not only in reserve, but also in the strictest secrecy until the last moment. He entrusted the command of it to Darius, who was allegedly mortally ill. During the preparation for the campaign, these forces were gathered in a special, secret place and Shahraman personally went there at night, suspecting that traitors might be in his entourage. This army was his backup plan, which could not be useful at all. But the strength of the Indian armies was so great that he had no choice. And now it was to be his winning blow, which would open the skull of the opponent and throw his lifeless body at the feet of the true master of these lands.

Seeing Darius, the Prince finally realized what was going on, and with excitement he threw himself into the thick of the battle again. The main blow was delivered by Darius' cavalry detachments, but this does not mean that there was not a single enemy left alive after them. And he still posed a serious threat. The Prince began to destroy the survivors, gathering the remnants of his army during a short respite.

Darius' army, like a spear or an arrow, pierced the remaining Indian forces several times, dividing and disorienting them. The Maharaja had no such plan in store, and this move came as a complete surprise to him. He relied only on the power and preparedness of his army. But now, in close and such a rapid battle, all combat devices and guns no longer made sense and turned from advantages into a burden. Therefore, it was decided to abandon them and direct all available forces into close combat. But the outcome of the battle was already predetermined and the forces of the Indians began to melt away, although it was too early to talk about a complete victory.

Luck could not accompany Darius forever and the Indians, recovering from the shock, rebuffed him, closing ranks again. By the time part of his army had lost their horses and was surrounded, the Prince's troops had arrived at the scene of the battle, and now he was fighting side by side with Darius.

"I am glad to see you in good health, my Prince!" Darius shouted when they met.

The prince nodded dryly and pointed to the next height when all opponents nearby had been defeated. He and Darius were left alone, the few allies who remained nearby fell. The battlefield turned from an endless ocean of death and cruelty into separate islands on which

battles were still going on. The forces of both sides were significantly exhausted and were only shadows of what they had been in the morning. The outcome of these final skirmishes will determine the outcome of the entire war.

Running to the top, they found some ruins - several long brick walls, a miraculously preserved arch and a couple of columns. The wind rose over the hill and threw dust and sand everywhere. Because of this, the Prince and Darius could hardly see anything and found themselves somewhere far away from the battle, as if some unknown force had transported them to another place.

Meanwhile, the wind was getting stronger, the sand was clogging his eyes, and he had to put his hand in front of his face to somehow protect himself from it. Along with the wind, the Prince suddenly felt a strange cold. Yes, the day was ending, night was approaching, but even the cold of the desert after sunset could not compare to this feeling. An unpleasant frost seemed to climb up the body, from bottom to top, slowly but persistently crawling under the skin. And yet he seemed to the Prince so... Familiar! But from where?

Darius also sensed something was amiss, and drew from its sheath the sword he had sheathed a few minutes ago. It was as if they were in the center of a small whirlwind, which was growing stronger and more ferocious with each passing second. The darkness around them was thickening, although the sun was not yet supposed to set. The reason was this storm, the dust of which became like thick black smoke creeping on the ground. And the strangest thing was that all this happened in almost absolute silence. It pressed on the ears, pinched the consciousness and depressed both of them.

Suddenly, the silence was broken by a few thuds. Only after a few seconds did the Prince realize that they were like footsteps. And as soon as he realized this, a giant monster with coal-black skin and red eyes exuding fury jumped out of the abyss of the whirlwind that swirled around them like a thick cloud around them. The prince recognized him almost instantly—it was Dahaka. But where did he come from? And what does he need? Could it be that the Maharaja, out of desperation, decided to use the Sands of Time and summoned such a powerful ally to his side? But why only now?

–Beware! Darius shouted and, pushing the Prince away, rushed into a fight with the monster.

But it was not destined to take place. The monster threw out long tentacles from its body and not only tore the unfortunate man apart, but literally turned him into dust. A slight golden flash was all that was left of Darius a second later. And in the next instant, the monster's eyes were turned to the Prince again. It went to him, and he prepared, it seemed, for a battle, but doubted its successful outcome. Darius was by no means a novice in the art of war, but all

his skills were completely useless and did not even give him a chance in this battle.

The prince was saved by chance - a horse suddenly jumped out from somewhere without a rider and he jumped on it with one jump and dived into the thick of the whirlwind, losing sight of him. The prince despised himself for weakness and, as he called it, cowardice, but for the first time in his life he felt a genuine fear, literally an animal horror of this monster. He was ready to face a hundred enemy soldiers. But he was not ready to meet Dahaka. This time, he wouldn't let the Prince live.

Driving his horse almost blindly, at random, the Prince frantically tried to put his thoughts in order and understand: what had happened? Did Maharaja really use the Sands? So he could command them and was waiting for the right time to use his secret weapon? But in this case, the whole Persian army, even if it were a hundred times more numerous, would not have had a chance against such an enemy. Fate must have a great sense of humor, since it decided to pit Dahaku against the Prince. After all, anyone, any of the tens of thousands of soldiers and commanders of Shahraman's armies could have encountered him. But chance decreed otherwise.

The prince hurried with the news to his father. It was necessary to come up with something, taking into account the new circumstances. The past, which the Prince had left months ago to smoulder in the embers of the night fire, found him again and burned with a bright flame, burning his mind and driving him mad again.

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The Persian army won that battle, but Shahraman took the Prince's story very skeptically. He did not believe in any monster, explaining everything by the Prince's fatigue. The battle had worn him down, shaken his sanity, his eyes frantically darting from side to side, his speech incoherent and strange, and his gestures ragged and jerky. He needed a good rest, and Shahraman drove the Prince away in a stern voice, telling him that such behavior was inappropriate for a future general.

At that moment, the Prince did not pay attention to his words, but on the morning of the second day after the battle, he suddenly remembered these words and realized what his father was talking about. He came to him without mentioning the Dahaka incident anymore. Shahraman told him that he wanted to appoint him the first general of his armies. He showed himself in battle and brought victory to Persia, and since Darius was killed, and Tuammak was already too old, the king simply could not find a better option. Up to a certain point, he wanted to keep all this a secret, but at the upcoming

celebration on the occasion of the victory, Shahraman would definitely announce his decision to everyone.

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The bodies of the dead soldiers of both armies covered everything around. Vultures pecked at them, and the stench of the midday heat spread throughout the area. No empire has ever seen a battle like this. Persia emerged victorious, but the price paid for it was enormous. Shahraman's army turned into a small army, which could now defend not a country, but only one city. But if Persia was bled dry, then India was beheaded altogether. The enemy soldiers turned out to be steadfast, and none of them fled from the battlefield. Therefore, everyone died as one. And along with them, commanders, military leaders, generals and Maharaja himself died.

The prince did not want this. And he spent seven years of his life trying to find a way to prevent such an outcome: countless unnecessary deaths and casualties, the destruction of an entire country, and the immense loss of his people. Starting his journey with Shahraman's band and then becoming a hermit, he quickly deviated from his original goals. He was driven not by his own selfishness, but by the desire to save many lives and his country. But it turned out that he was a soldier and really good and capable of something only in battle. Now he feared that the story with the Sands could repeat itself - there was simply no one to protect them. He only hoped that because of the losses, his father would not immediately decide on a new campaign. And now Farah will no longer be able to become his ally. The protracted war brought up in her a persistent hatred for him.

Returning to the place of Darius' death, the Prince, together with Shahraman, found the sword of the former commander of the army that ensured the success of the entire battle. But his body was nowhere to be found. The prince seemed to have begun his story again, but Shahraman stopped all his attempts immediately after he hinted that he wanted to return to the life of a hermit again. He tried to justify this by the fact that he could find the answer to how to protect Persia from a terrible enemy, but Shahraman did not believe in the existence of any monster at all. He believed that he was doing the Prince a great honor and that he should take this burden with all responsibility, discarding crazy thoughts and ideas. He will be able to truly protect his people only by assuming the rank of first general and valiantly defending Persia from real, not imaginary, enemies. Well, what kind of general leaves his army? And what kind of army is it without a general?

The prince reconciled himself to his father's decision. He no longer contradicted his will, and soon all the surviving Persians turned towards Babylon. And the places of battle were henceforth considered dead, cursed lands, and anyone was forbidden to even approach these corrupted lands for many years.

Chapter 5. Hermit

Marvellously! This is great! I am overwhelmed by emotions, but now there is no fear among them! It's joy, it's delight, it's admiration – anything, but not fear! From now on, I simply have nothing to fear and nothing to doubt. I will definitely reconcile with my son. I will not part with this diary. Although why do I need it? I don't know, but for some reason I feel that he is needed. And I am used to trusting my intuition. However, now I have time to put everything in order.

After finishing the previous entry, I again felt the approaching pain. Without waiting for an attack, I went to an abandoned garden - fresh air has a beneficial effect on me. The garden is especially beautiful in the spring. It is filled with the aroma of flowering trees, decorated with flowers and many petals that have flown around. In the midst of such an abundance of life, the pain fades and disappears.

I sat in the shade of my favorite tree. It is very large and branchy, completely covered with pink flowers; combines the seemingly impossible: gnarled, dry branches and beautiful bright lights of petals. This harmony of the ugly and the beautiful is fascinating. This is really beautiful, although nature never deliberately strives for beauty – it is contained in its absolute naturalness.

With me was Jatta, my faithful friend, who followed me everywhere. Even if it was just a dog, it always made me feel a little better in its presence. As soon as I put my hand into her long white six, she would get closer and put her head on my lap. Her gaze was always full of gratitude and kindness.

A soft warm wind was blowing and my thoughts were flowing away with it. I don't remember what I was thinking. Probably again about death - what else could I think about?

Fool! He thought about death when he had not yet really known life! Its true, albeit hidden, meaning. The beauty of life lies in mysteries and riddles that not everyone can solve, let alone see. So I'm lucky? No, it can't be a mere accident. It's fate! Today I saw these threads, touched them...

Time flew surprisingly quickly and imperceptibly. I had not seen anyone all day, not even in the distance, and I was very glad of it – solitude suited me most of all, it was my best friend. In solitude, it is easier to talk to infinity – an inexhaustible source of truth. This truth is mute, and few can see in it anything more than magnificent plains, cut by the waters of rivers and lakes, and growing into rocks, beyond which lies the endless sea, adjacent to the expanses of heaven and golden in the rays of the sunset. But isn't that enough?

All this time I was clutching a small medallion with a sweaty palm. Once my father gave it to me. I was a child then, and he told

me that the medallion represented our Island. The irregularities, one in the shape of a crescent moon with strongly elongated horns and the other, round, really resembled the hills of the Island where my people and I have lived since time immemorial. He also said that the medallion was passed down from generation to generation with the words: "He must never leave the island." Unfortunately, no one remembers where it came from, and what exactly these words mean.

That evening, I decided to go to the Abyss and throw a medallion there instead of a ritual stone. I still admire this tradition – to throw a stone into the Abyss at the end of my life in the expectation that one day it will be filled to the brim. Although, it is not the result itself that is important, but the approach – to measure the infinite depth by one's small contribution, ruler after ruler, generation after generation. One person – one stone. A delicate balance between eternity and the prophesied end. What exactly will happen in the end, if it does come, no one knows. But ancient legends speak of a new life.

I was going to extract my ritual stone from a ring that was passed from one ruler to another. I knew that I had no one to pass it on, and that the Island lay ahead of me only oblivion. My son planned to leave these places, seeing no consolation for himself. For the past few months, all I have been thinking about is throwing him into the Abyss and ending his life as tradition requires. Draw a line and soon step beyond it. But when the time came, I suddenly changed my mind and decided to throw the locket there. After all, there, at the bottom, he would never leave the Island, and no one would be able to prevent it. And the ring would have remained with me, the last ruler of the Island.

And that's when the most amazing thing began. In the evening, feeling the creeping pain again, I went to see her. To the great Abyss. After standing for a minute in thought and enjoying her majestic breath - from somewhere in the depths there was a faint rumble, occasionally interrupted by silence - I threw the locket into the darkness.

"That's it," I thought. I was sure that this was the end. But he was not at all what I expected him to be. Rather, this is the beginning. Maybe the beginning of that very new life? But why so early? And why me?

A second later, a strange sound was heard. Or rather, he was not strange in himself; The strange thing was that it sounded at all. Tinkling... At first, I didn't even pay attention to him – it was too absurd to hear something like that. Dozens of generations of rulers have thrown their stones and heard nothing. The bottom was unreachable. But no matter how much my mind protested against what was happening, I had to realize that it was all real, because

soon the darkness (it was already night, and the sky was covered with clouds) was torn apart by a bright golden light. The dome vault above the Abyss lit up from within, shadows scattered in all directions, and I felt an incredible lightness in my consciousness, instantly forgetting about my illness. For a second, I even thought that I was dead. I was incredibly far from my flesh and at the same time more united with it than ever. Far away because not only did he not feel pain, but he could not even imagine it. And I was one, because I knew that it was still my body. Though it was reborn, I knew it, felt every little part, and enjoyed living with it. I felt a kind of freedom, although I could not find a use for it, I could not even come close to realizing it. Although what am I talking about? I still feel it. This is not just freedom. The abyss opened its gates for me, allowed me to touch eternity. I feel a great power in it and that gradually I will be able to absorb it completely. It sounds like I'm dead... And what I had been speculating about happened. But I'm alive! Alive! There is no doubt about it! And, therefore, I will not only be able to receive this knowledge - I will be able to pass it on to my people. Now our Island is on the verge of a new life. We are already in it. It turns out that the legend is right...

The medallion seemed to hang in the air. "But if there is a metallic clink, does it mean that he hit something?" – I thought. The glow, meanwhile, intensified and I was drawn to it, or rather to the locket that emitted this light. Only one thought was growing in my head - to approach him, to touch him. And at the same time, I was frightened by the speed with which I agreed to all this. To reach the goal, I had to walk through the air. Insanity? Perhaps yes.

However, it doesn't matter. I have already resigned myself to death. Then what is madness? Freedom from everything I knew before and openness to new knowledge. And I took a step, perhaps the most important one in my entire life. A step towards Fate, which shone with such a wonderful light that absorbed everything around. It seemed to penetrate me, its brilliance healed me, gave me strength and confidence. And now I am standing in the middle of the void, above the Abyss, against all common sense. Perhaps ancient people looked at fire in the same way, it seemed to them a real miracle. And this light was very much like it – it opened the way in the darkness and warmed me. With each step I took, it grew stronger and stronger, and my consciousness seemed to dissolve in it. Although, perhaps, this was how I felt relief from the pain that had finally left me.

Sometimes life can be incredibly cruel. As much as there is not even death. For a dying person, death is salvation, deliverance from torment and suffering, if he has already resigned himself to the inevitability and is ready to break with life. But she continues to

torment him, does not want to let go. And at the very moment when a person has already soaked in death, recognized its smell, tasted it, life jerks him back in its direction with a sharp and rough jerk, as if mocking and apologizing at the same time, giving him a breath of fresh air and new hope.

I bent down and took the locket in my hands. Without any fear and a shadow of doubt. It was clear that he was the center of everything that was happening, the source of this miraculous, magical light. And at the same moment, a dull low thud was heard from the Abyss, and it lit up with a pale golden glow. From somewhere below, whirlwinds of small sparks or dust particles began to slowly rise, which now literally passed through me. Individual streams poured into the medallion and were immediately emitted back to it. It was hard to tell if they were small particles from the depths of the Abyss, or just sparks of light. I felt warmth, almost heat, covering my whole body. But I practically did not feel the body itself - it seemed to dissolve after the mind, connecting with these wonderful streams. My body was like a void, some kind of cavity in this golden-white cloud, and a swarm of sparks sought to fill this emptiness. I felt the unity of consciousness with this swarm, as if I saw myself from the outside, but I did not feel fear – as if someone was telling me what to do. Providence led me further, and now my mind itself becomes this whirlwind, which tries not only to fill the cavity, but also to remove all its flaws. I literally breathed new life into my body and healed it with just one effort of will! Not by myself, but by the magic of this cloud, summoned by a medallion from the depths of the Abyss. I only channeled her power, which seemed to me gentle and submissive, but at the same time extraordinarily powerful. Now I understand why the medallion should never have left the Island. It contained an extraordinary power and it was I who had the honor to reveal it!

Now I see that all this is not an accident. This is a series of interrelated events, a chain that stretched from ancient people to this moment and allowed me to go beyond the boundaries of the usual. The Thread of Fate that pierced space and time, a huge Abyss that pulls into its depths, but at the same time does not allow you to fall if you trust it. And this endless fall is what really kept me and the medallion from falling. I see in this a special path predestined by Fate. I believe in its power, I see its essence – it protects a person from accidents and leads him along the only right path. This light... He revealed the truth to me. But it did not warm like fire. I think I was mistaken in my feelings. It was the light of reason, the light of revelation. Absolute and pure. It allowed you to touch special knowledge and fill your life with real meaning and find your purpose.

I felt as if I had been reborn. The wisdom of thousands of generations poured into my mind. Hundreds of voices rang in my head, speaking to me from the past. They, like flashes of lightning, flashed in the darkness and called somewhere into the unknown. But it was not dangerous – it was a movement forward along the line of Fate. And I could easily return to my body, but I decided not to stop there, but to concentrate even more on filling the emptiness in the place where it once was. Having lost track of time, it was as if I was creating myself anew. It wasn't about appearance, I tried to complement myself so that I got something more complete and perfect. Something more complete and not subject to disease and pain, not knowing fatigue and the effects of age. My mind had already been reborn into a new form – I realized that, on the contrary, it could not be made perfect. But on the other hand, he can always be open to new knowledge, able to endlessly absorb wisdom and experience and complement a perfect body.

My name is Namtar, I am the ruler of the island of Usagggkar and I enter this new life without any hesitation or doubt. I solemnly vow to lead my people to prosperity through my miraculous discovery. It's a new time for everything and everyone!

Namtar's Journal, Entry 5

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The black sand melted and turned into a thick, viscous and vile slurry that covered everything around, from horizon to horizon. Instead of the usual blood-red desert, there was only a leaden-black ocean everywhere, endless and merciless so that even the stars seemed to drown in it and their light went out that night. The air was saturated with the smell of blood and smoke, it crept like poison into a person, into his mind, poisoned his thoughts and turned his heart into stone. And now the Prince, who until recently was walking through the desert with the Persian army, on horseback, is already walking on his own feet, but the black destructive element draws him deeper and deeper; He is almost unable to move his leg and slowly sinks into it, plunging into darkness. Its attraction is immense, monstrous, and seemed to slow down even the passage of time. A puncture in the fabric of the universe that swallowed the Prince himself and everything around him, turning him into nothing. The only real feeling that remained with him was an enveloping cold, shackling the mind and will, instilling animal terror and depriving him of all hope.

Suddenly, the Prince woke up from the fact that he was shaken on another hummock. It was indeed night around, but he was still

riding on horseback, keeping close to the army. The desert had its usual appearance, and everything he saw and felt seemed to be just a dream. But frighteningly real, almost real - the Prince could not get rid of the feeling that the dream had instilled in him for a long time. In addition, he was in a very depressed mood even before that. Hopelessness is the best word to describe what he felt. And it was not the war itself and the death that it sowed around him that worried him. The prince had long been accustomed to death and cruelty. He was worried about the very incident that caused Darius' death. India had turned a terrible force against the Persians, and the Prince had no doubt that Dahaka would return and bring ruin to everything. There will be other madmen who will conquer the Sands, and then the future of his people will be very gloomy. The Prince's past seems to have risen from oblivion, taking shape. The darkness that haunted him now had a name and ceased to be something imaginary, non-existent. But she still continued to appear to him in everything, and now she haunted him even in his dreams. The prince knew that he would be forced to return to his search and bring the matter to an end.

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The army advanced very slowly. A lot of the wounded required care, and it was possible to move normally only at night, capturing the evening and morning a little. The heat of the day greatly complicated the way, and usually at this time the army rested and treated the wounded.

Navid's squad, caught in the thick of the action, suffered the most, and except for Iman, Navid himself, and a couple of other soldiers, all were killed or injured in the battle. Navid, whose position was already unenviable, was now completely without support. He feared that he would face severe punishment for such inept command of the detachment.

Iman was full of disappointment. The path he had followed was now disgusting to him. He had to be literally up to his neck in blood. He was forced, defending his life and his country, to kill enemies one by one. And now the picture of the battle, the ever-present pain and cruelty hung before his eyes and did not leave his mind. In the silence of the night, he heard the screams of people and the clashing of blades. The real war turned out to be so disgusting for him that, unexpectedly for himself, he lost faith in anything. His goals turned out to be not just vague - they turned out to be false. Dirt, blood, and murder in such exorbitant quantities seemed to knock the ground out from under his feet, he could not even rejoice at the victory of Persia. He could not find the strength for anything but to slowly follow the

army, night after night. But he no longer felt part of it. It was as if he did not belong to this world at all. War makes anyone a hermit.

When Iman first came to his senses and realized the changes in his soul, the first thing he got rid of was the weapon, which he hated. It was easy to write off the loss of the sword as a mere accident - the war could explain anything. But now he understood the most important thing – nothing could explain or justify the war itself. At least, for him. Iman no longer saw himself in her role as a warrior or anyone else. The only thing that disappointed him more was that he had walked the wrong path for half of his life. In the end, he traveled all this way only to be disappointed, to see his mistakes in full. He stumbled and fell, and besides, he could not get up from his knees. And, perhaps, he did not even want to, for fear of making a mistake again. It was as if he was begging some of his gods for forgiveness, humbly bowing, literally prostrating himself in anticipation of their mercy. And he certainly did not want to somehow celebrate the victory in the war - it was given with too much blood, even if it was dictated by necessity. Any joy seemed to him a mockery of all those who had given their lives for her.

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One morning, as the army was preparing for another camp, the Prince led his horse beside his father, Tuammak and Haraz.

"We have not more than two days' journey left, my king," said Haraz.

–It's cool! Shahraman replied. The long journey had already tired him, even though he was accustomed to hiking. "Send messengers to Babylon and order to begin preparations for the festival!" We will celebrate our great victory with a feast that the world has never seen before.

"Good," Haraz replied respectfully, nodding respectfully, and left.

Tuammak, who had been dozing all this time and showing no interest, suddenly perked up and muttered something under his breath. Obviously, he liked the idea of a feast very much.

In recent years, age has somehow changed Tuammak especially quickly. From a brave and wise military leader, he turned into a quarrelsome old man, thinking only about how to rest and fill his belly. And he began to perform his duties very poorly, rather out of habit. Shahraman had been thinking about replacing him with someone for years. But only recently did he have a good opportunity - the reputation of the Prince and his difficult, but still successful in the decisive battle left no doubt about the correctness of the choice of a new first general - the second person in Persia after the king himself.

This would have transformed the Prince from a figurehead of the future heir to the throne into a man with real power. Therefore, the upcoming feast was supposed to be not only a celebration in honor of the victory, but also a starting point for new orders, changes and preparations for the transfer of power and the throne to his son. And that's why Shahraman deliberately took this controversial step, turning a blind eye to the huge losses, the grief of people and the many wounded. He even replied to someone who decided to object, and quite sharply:

"Nothing else matters. We won, no matter how or at what cost. Victory is absolute and this is not up for discussion, and I consider any actions of my army to be correct, since they led to this victory. No punishment and no grief, the price has already been paid and we need to rejoice at what we got in the end. Nothing should overshadow the victory!

And with a look he made it clear that he did not want to hear a word more on this topic. Although in fact, this decision was not easy for him, and he knew that the losses of his troops were an unhealed wound and the echo of war would sound for many decades to come. But could he, as a king, have chosen any other path? And now the Prince was to follow the same path behind him, who would rule in a calm time, without an impending threat. Not looking back, but, on the contrary, rushing at full speed, towards new opportunities and the wind of freedom.

The army passed another ridge of mountains and found itself in the desert. As far as the Prince remembered, it was not particularly long, no more than half a day's journey. It was decided to walk, including during the day, except for the hours when the sun was simply unbearably hot, turning the road into torture. But now the dawn was just getting closer to the horizon, and the air was still shrouded in the coolness and gloom of the night. Suddenly, on his right, the Prince saw some ruins appear from behind the dune. He could hardly make out whether it was a temple, a castle, or something else, but he was sure that he did not remember this place. In his long years of searching, he had never stumbled upon it. But, after a moment, his attention was attracted by someone's silhouette. The fact was, he did not notice it at first, that the ruins were inhabited. Some tents adjoined them, and a night fire smoldered nearby. Apparently, the inhabitant of this place, awakened by the noise of the army, came out to see him off. And at that very moment, he caught the Prince's eye.

The silhouette suddenly seemed familiar to him, and a strange and even bold guess came to him. The prince saw the old teacher in him and, after a little hesitation, rushed headlong in his direction. Shahraman shouted something after him, suspecting something was

amiss, but the Prince ignored it. After all, he hadn't started looking for another one yet, he just wanted to ask for advice.

Shahraman, realizing that he could not do anything about the situation, ordered Haraz to follow the Prince and make sure that he returned. He complied, gesturing to stop Naysir and Madid, who were about to follow him.

The prince was already approaching Zoroaster. Now he saw him well, and there was no longer any doubt that it was him, his old teacher. Only time took its toll, and he became a very decrepit old man. Skin of an unnatural brown color, with dark spots, even more sunken eyes, around which black circles could be seen - all this betrayed his advanced age in him. Perhaps even too old. The prince could not remember anyone else who had lived to such an age.

It's time... This word stuck so firmly in the Prince's head that it involuntarily made him remember something very important. Or rather, to remember that he knew something important. But I still could not express it in words. A ghostly, hazy vision that he had been chasing for years.

Of course! Sands of Time! In the Prince's mind, vague childhood memories surfaced of how Zoroaster constantly talked about them. He was the only one in all of Babylon who knew anything about the Sands! And all these years the Prince searched in the wrong place, completely forgetting about the old man's stories. Overwhelmed with delight, the Prince jumped from his horse and approached the teacher. He was impatient to ask him everything.

"Hello, my Prince," Zoroaster spoke first, anticipating the Prince's questions.

He saw the latter's eyes burning with fire, impatient to ask important questions, but noticing another figure approaching them, he motioned for the Prince to enter his dwelling. Zoroaster thought that it was Shahraman himself who was heading here, and as if he was frightened by it. After all, it was he who once banished him to the desert and it is unlikely that he changed his mind - Zoroaster knew the character of the king and his categorical nature too well. The prince did not notice the approach of this figure at all - his mind was too much gripped by anticipation. Finally, he will be able to get answers to his questions. Is his search finally over?

When he reached the place, Haraz approached the tent, but did not go inside. He decided to listen to the conversation outside. He was surprised and curious – what could a simple hermit in the desert be so interested in the Prince? It seems that everything is very difficult and Haraz was even glad that Shahraman sent him, and he did not take bodyguards. Quite by chance, he managed to find something extremely interesting.

"I hear the war has come to these parts?" Zoroaster was the first to ask.

"Yes," the Prince replied dryly. – Against India.

"I told him that one day it would happen... Inevitably, inevitably! The old man said.

–To whom? The Prince asked uncomprehendingly.

"Maharadja of India, your enemy, my Prince," explained the old teacher.

"I don't know if he is the only one to blame for everything that has happened," the Prince objected. – All these are the consequences of other events, the real reasons are deeper. And it was with them that I tried to fight.

– To fight the causes? Have mercy, it's impossible, what is gone cannot be returned," Zoroaster was surprised, grinning slightly. But his eyes did not smile at this.

– I also thought so once. But then... Something bad happened when my father and I were returning from a previous trip to India. We attacked the city of Maharaja and...

The prince stammered, not knowing how best to describe what had happened, which was still a nightmare in his memory, as if everything had happened a couple of minutes ago. Zoroaster turned away and stepped aside. Taking a deep breath, he broke the silence.

"Have you found the Sands of Time?"

His voice was full of regret and sadness.

"Worse," said the Prince. "I've opened them!"

Zoroaster turned to the Prince. His gaze changed, but the Prince could not understand what it meant.

– It was about seven years ago. And I spent all this time trying to find the answers. I was able to correct what I had done, but it gave rise to more mistakes. This war is only my fault," the Prince continued.

"No matter how much you wander, he will find you," the old teacher finally answered.

–Who? The Prince asked.

"Dahaka, a beast that cannot be stopped by any force. He is inevitability itself, fate itself. And he's chasing you! Zoroaster explained.

"Follow me?" But why? Didn't the Indians try to win the battle with it? However, it is very strange that they neglected the strength of such a powerful ally at the beginning of the battle," the Prince was surprised.

"Anyone who opens the Sands of Time must die. Dahaka is the guardian of time, watching the flow and destroying any intruder," Zoroaster explained. "And even more so, the beast obeys no one!" He

is not sent by someone's hand, he is the living embodiment of fate and inevitable death.

The prince sank to the ground, pondering what he had heard. It turns out that the beast came only for him? And Darius died, having absolutely nothing to do with it? And he cowardly escaped, only by a happy accident remaining alive?

"What can I do to change that?" The Prince asked. There was despair in his voice.

–No problem. You can't stop the beast, you can't hide and you can't run away from it. It's a miracle that you're still alive. But if you return to Babylon for a while, it will overtake you," the old man replied with a sigh. "You are destined to die, my Prince. And you will die.

For the first time in his life, the Prince felt real fear. In front of inevitability, cold and formidable inevitability.

"What can you tell us about the Sands?" What else do you know? And what kind of book is it, how is it related to them? The Prince finally began his questions. But the feeling of delight disappeared somewhere, and his eyes frantically darted from side to side.

"Where did you get it?" Zoroaster asked without answering.

"I took it from the vizier Maharaja," the Prince said. "Or rather, he dropped it.

"It's a relic of the Isle of Time," the old man finally replied. He opened the book, ran through the pages, and handed it back to the Prince, saying, "Unfortunately, I don't understand what is written in it. So Amar had quietly dragged her away from the Island? I always suspected something was wrong with him.

"What kind of island is this?" The Prince asked. These were the first words in seven years that shed light on the mystery that had tormented him for years and dragged him into an endless search.

"The Isle of Time is the place where the Sands were created. A distant island two weeks sailing from the coast of India, from where Maharaja stole the Hourglass and the dagger," Zoroaster began his story.

"The place where the Sands were created...," the Prince said, thinking about something.

"There he also found special doors - portals leading through time. With their help, he was able to go back in time for hundreds, thousands of years! Almost to the very moment of the birth of the Sands!

Zoroaster spoke of all these things as casually as if they were all taken for granted. The prince was surprised at the details in which the old man described the adventures of Maharaja.

"How do you know so much about this place?" he asked. But as soon as he asked this question, he already knew the answer. He

understood everything even without Zoroaster's subsequent explanation.

"I was there, next to Maharaja. Many years before he entered the service of your father. And I saw the power and destructive power of the Sands," the old man said.

After thinking for a while, the Prince asked:

"Can I get there too?" I've used the Sands once before to make it look like I've never discovered them. What if I went back in time and prevented their creation from happening in the first place?

–Nonsense! Even if you get to the Island, you'll have to deal with the Empress! Zoroaster explained.

–Empress? The Prince asked in surprise.

–No matter. Such tricks will not work on Dahaka anyway. He'll catch you anyway," the old teacher said sadly.

"It's better to try and fail than just sit and wait for death!" The Prince said decisively.

"Well, it's up to you. Go, my Prince, but remember that your journey will not end well. You can't change your fate. No one can do it! Zoroaster answered.

"How do I get to the Island?" The Prince asked, ignoring the old man's last words. But that didn't mean they didn't work on him. He thought he was doing it for a good cause, not just for his own selfish motives. His actions marked the beginning of a whole chain of terrible events that do not stop to this day. And now he has a great chance to fix everything at once!

"You need to sail towards the waning moon, in the month of Kislim, at the very end of autumn. At the same time, the Phoenician star should be looking at your back all the time. Swim until you see a constellation in the shape of a cross – this is a dagger that the shepherd threw far beyond the edge of the sky when he renounced war and accepted a peaceful life. The tip of the dagger will point you to the Island. It is surrounded by choppy waters full of dangerous rocks and whirlpools. There is no other way to get to the Island of Time.

"I'll remember that." Thank you," said the Prince, getting up. He saw no point in further conversation and wasting precious time. If everything goes well, he will still have the opportunity to visit the old teacher and talk to him without haste. And determined, the Prince left the tent to meet Haraz, to his surprise. He, having carefully overheard the whole conversation, seized the initiative and said:

"Are you going on a trip?" I can help you, my Prince. I've heard that this can somehow stop the war or undo all this death and destruction?

"Yes...," the Prince drawled vaguely.

"But your father won't approve of it!" It is not fitting for the first general to abandon his army," Haraz continued.

"Yes, but you must understand that I want to prevent all this!" The Prince blurted out.

–I see it. And therefore I really want to help you! Haraz explained. "I'll help you organize a secret escape and recruit a crew for the voyage." Do you remember the route well?

"Like your own name!" The Prince answered.

Haraz and the Prince discussed some details and returned to the army, catching up with Shahraman and the generals' retinue half an hour later.

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Night found the Persian army camping for rest, food and dressing of wounds. The prince went to visit the few survivors of his army, wanting to talk to Iman as well. On his journey, he would have needed reliable and trusted people like him. The prince could trust him, although he was not going to tell him about the true goals of his journey. He would explain this by necessity, by duty to Persia, by promises of unprecedented riches and unheard-of power.

This could help Iman escape from himself, from the war and its consequences. Even if their journey turns out to be deadly, and he does not survive it - let him! Nothing could be worse than what he was going through now. Perhaps it will save his soul and restore at least a piece of his former peace to it. But the Prince could not find Iman that evening, and the next day there were too many other soldiers around and the Prince had to postpone this conversation.

When the Prince went in search of Iman, Haraz took Shahraman aside and whispered to him:

– Yes, that's right. An escape is planned, the Prince wants to leave everything under some far-fetched pretext and go on his travels again.

Shahraman was furious when he heard this. But he was not going to go to the Prince immediately and unleash his anger on him. He was going to prevent the escape by teaching the Prince a lesson. He will have to learn his lesson, realizing that he should not contradict the will of his father and the king of Great Persia. And that he has eyes and ears everywhere.

Chapter 6. Conspiracy

The last few days have flown by in an instant. But now I can afford not to count them as before, and instead just live and breathe deeply! Moreover, I did not waste it, and the very next day I went to the Abyss to make sure that everything that happened was not a dream in my dying delirium. But everything turned out to be true. Over and over again, first at night, and then in the middle of the day, I threw the medallion into the abyss, but it did not fall. And again I walked through the air and saw this wonderful light, saw myself from the outside, and over and over again a revelation appeared to me that is difficult to describe in words. But each time the visions did not fade away, but flared up with a new force – whirlwinds of golden dust particles enveloped me and I saw further and deeper – my path in life, my own Fate, which was carefully written by someone in the book of life.

Gradually, I began to understand that miracle was replaced by knowledge – and I began to go further and further. Each time I returned a different, new person. More complete, if I may say so, because I continued to complete myself with the help of what I saw. Now I was no longer busy healing my body – my illness had completely disappeared – but I was busy filling my consciousness. The doors of my mind were open to new knowledge. It was as if I was trying – and, most importantly, I was able to! – to scoop out the entire abyss of knowledge and transfer it to your own head, bit by bit.

As I learned what was opening up to my mind, I gradually began to understand the essence of what I had discovered. This force, which at first I simply called the Light, turned out to be more material. Everything consisted of the same golden, sparkling grains of sand that hovered in the air above the Abyss. They were the ones who emitted this bright Light. And they also permeated my body and my consciousness, existing as if in two worlds – the corporeal and the conscious. I have pondered their nature for a long time and have called them the Sands of Destiny. And with each new time, I became more and more convinced that I was right. The glow of the Sands soon ceased to be so dazzling, but only so that I could see more, penetrate into the very essence of things, and better study what I encountered. Maybe a name like "Sands of Knowledge" would have been appropriate, but somehow everything was woven into Destiny – my own, my people's, and the entire Island. And this knowledge was inextricably linked with it, literally strung on its thread.

Sometimes everything that happened was like a dream. It even seemed to me that I could drown in this new wonderful world, dissolve without a trace and simply disappear. But Peski gave me the opportunity to constantly create myself, fill everything with new

experience and knowledge. And I felt that I remained the center of this world, and did not dissolve in it. But the best thing that helped me was that I had the same dream almost every day. Ordinarily, I hardly remember the details of dreams, but this one repeated itself so persistently and clearly that it was deeply imprinted in my consciousness. To such an extent that when I woke up, I could think about it for a long time and even postpone my next trip to the Abyss. And this helped me to clearly separate reality (even such a strange and new one) and a dream. Because in the dream everything was different.

I was in the same place, already familiar. I also saw myself from the outside, except that for some reason there was no medallion in my hand. And so, time after time, I stood in the center of the whirlwind of grains of sand and peered into it. And it seemed to me that I saw my own reflection. Very pale and almost motionless. And I redoubled the gifts that the Sands gave me, but the reflection only faded. What did it mean? Was I getting closer to my goal, creating myself anew, scooping everything I could out of the Abyss? Or, on the contrary, did I lose sight of something, and it went further and further away from me? And at some point, the reflection disappeared altogether. But at the end of the dream, it happened that I wandered around the abandoned castle, and saw no one but these pale and elusive reflections of myself - sometimes they could be seen several at once.

I couldn't find the answer in my dream, and the morning thoughts didn't lead to anything either. And so I ran to the Sands with new questions, hoping that one day I would find out and understand everything. Time after time, the medallion worked like a kind of key that opened an invisible seal and allowed me to touch the miracle.

Namtar's Diary, Entry 6

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Daily quarrels with his father only strengthened one thought in the Prince: this could not go on any longer. Another week and horror and darkness will devour him from the inside. He felt an eternal fear that he simply could not get rid of. For no reason, his breath caught in his throat every time he turned a corner, into the darkness of a corridor or alley. He waited for death to be waiting for him everywhere, ready to grab his throat and tear him to pieces. All his vague visions that had haunted him over the years took shape, and Zoroaster's words only increased his fear. For the first time in his life, the Prince was truly afraid and ready to just run. Even if he

didn't manage to get to the Island of Time, he simply could not bear this agonizing wait.

Shahraman did not show that he knew anything other than what the Prince was telling him. He did not dwell too much, describing his fears only in general terms, tirelessly telling about the incident in the war when Darius died. But Shahraman took any of his words with hostility, calling them nonsense. After all, he was the ruler of a Great Empire that had won a crushing victory in the war - who would dare to threaten his son, the first general in five minutes, and in his own city? He explained this behavior of the Prince to himself by the fear of great responsibility and sometimes even doubted whether he was in a hurry with the appointment. But he saw his son in battle, heard stories about him and did not doubt his valor, strength and skills. All you need is a little strong fatherly will, and the river will flow along the channel that fate has prepared for it. He was sure of it, and he was only going to prevent the escape that Haraz had warned him about. And so he ordered that the Prince should be followed everywhere by observers, wherever he went, except for the moments he spent talking to his father. Over time, the Prince began to notice the surveillance, but did not pay attention to it - he had a plan that his father did not even suspect. Haraz offered him his help and a few ideas on how to slip right out from under Shahraman's nose.

From time to time, Haraz would ask the Prince to come and tell him a little more about the Island. He said that thanks to this, he would be able to better prepare for the trip and the consequences that it would entail. Haraz wanted to know more about the strange power that could turn back time. He tried in every possible way to find out from the Prince everything that he knew, but the latter did not want to mention the incident in Azad, and therefore his stories were vague and terse. He only repeated that he did not believe in the inevitability of fate, and this power would help him change it. And this thought beckoned his interlocutor, captivated and intoxicated him.

In those moments when the Prince visited Haraz, no one was watching him either - the latter was simply beyond suspicion. After all, it was him who Shahraman asked to look after the Prince and teach him a lesson. Taking advantage of his position, Haraz was free to prepare for his escape, while continuing to play the role of a loyal servant.

"I'll help you assemble a crew for the journey." You will choose some of the people yourself, if there are those whom you still trust. I'll take care of the rest," he said to the Prince one day.

"What do I need to do?" The Prince asked.

"Just name the names of those you trust." And then just wait," Kharaz explained. "Soon there will be a feast in honor of the victory, and this will be the best day to escape. I'll let you know in advance.

"Iman and Navid are soldiers from my army," the Prince answered him. "I'm sure of them.

"Excellent," said Haraz. "Now, I think you'd better leave." Your father will arrive soon.

The prince left the chambers of Haraz and went to the barracks. In recent days, he found solace in training, in friendly fights. In addition, he was preparing for a kind of performance at the feast. Father, despite their constant disagreements, was still going to announce his decision to appoint the Prince as the first general at the end of the evening. In order to give weight to his words and dispel all doubts in his son's head, he gave instructions to put a special tattoo on his arm, which he had to hide from everyone until the solemn evening.

The training was also useful to the Prince - he was preparing for a journey full of dangers and not promising anything. He would definitely have to face an opponent while defending his life with a sword in his hands, so it was very important to stay in shape. In addition, exhausting battles slightly muffled his gloomy thoughts, distracted him from constant terror and thoughts of imminent collapse.

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After returning from the campaign, the Prince discovered that Iman was missing. He was firmly convinced that he had survived and was returning to Babylon with the army. But day after day, when he came to the barracks, he could not find him. Still, he told Haraz his name, as if he were guessing or hoping for something. Over the years of their acquaintance, he proved to be a loyal and reliable comrade, although the Prince was unaware of the changes that had taken place in him.

Meanwhile, despite Shahraman's decrees forgiving any mistakes and fully acknowledging the greatness and infallibility of Persia's victory, the reality was that Navid had become virtually an outcast. Other commanders avoided him, no one greeted him when they met, and he was simply ignored at meetings. Soon even the soldiers stopped paying attention to him. He lost all respect and did not know what to do next. Navid was not going to leave the service – he had managed to get to Babylon with such difficulty, and he could not just throw away his dream. I couldn't just give up. But day by day, the situation only got worse. There were only a small handful of people still loyal to him, but it didn't seem to be for long.

Everything changed the evening when Haraz invited Navid to his place. The first was very surprised by this - of course, such a high-ranking person summons him to a personal audience! Now Haraz was not at all what he knew it to be. Now he was a noble man close to the tsar, recently titled "the eye of the tsar". But then why does he call him? If they wanted to demote him or expel him altogether, then someone from the command, a few ranks below, would be enough. But Haraz is the king's right hand, his eyes and ears! What could he need?

Overwhelmed by strange and ambiguous thoughts, Navid entered Haraz's reception chambers at the appointed hour. He was facing the window, his hands folded behind his back. Without turning, he said dryly and sternly:

–Come.

Navid approached, and Haraz, who had finally turned around, said to the guards accompanying him (a day or two ago, Navid had talked to the Prince about something, and now he was also being followed):

"Leave us."

After waiting for the door to close and being silent for another minute, Haraz finally spoke.

"You don't know why you're here, do you?"

"No, sir," Navid said a little timidly.

"Your general has spoken for you, and I have a special assignment for you," Haraz explained.

These words immediately calmed Navid somewhat, and instead of doubts, interest appeared in his eyes. This is exactly what Kharaz was counting on. He was well aware that the journey he was preparing required a particularly careful choice of people. They can eventually just run away – far from home, in the face of danger, and without any clear goal, they will simply have no reason to carry out their mission. Therefore, he needed people like Navid: close to despair, or looking for something unusual, almost unbelievable. People who are led by an idea, by their hearts, and not by an order from above.

–What? Navid asked. He was glad that he would have the opportunity to prove himself again and regain his lost trust.

"There was a soldier named Iman in your squad," Haraz explained. "Find him and tell him that you are going on a journey soon." The ship and the crew are my concern.

Navid was surprised at what he heard, but did not ask stupid questions. He was not interested in the reasons for the trip and Haraz's motives, so he only clarified:

"Is that all you have to do with me?"

"At the moment, yes," Haraz told him. "On the appointed day, you, the crew and the Prince will set sail, where you will learn about the rest.

After these words, everything settled in Navid's head and he bowed and left, seeing no point in taking up Haraz's time any longer. Moreover, he probably does not have much time, and the search for Iman will not be an easy matter - he disappeared without a trace.

In the evening of the same day, Haraz summoned Tutak, a rich merchant who became famous for profiting from various adventures, dangerous and even dubious adventures in his youth. However, a lot of time has passed since then, and he has not done such things. His trade was going through hard times, although it could not be said that he was about to go bankrupt. Haraz was sure that he could interest the old scoundrel by promising him untold riches. And the essence of the matter was not even in their number, but in their uniqueness. With little idea of what kind of Sands of Time he was talking about, Haraz used his imagination to trick Tutak into lighting a fire in his eyes. The merchant, without hesitation, agreed to help Haraz by equipping a ship for the journey. Haraz did not have the opportunity to use the king's fleet. Despite all his powers, he could simply arouse the suspicions of Shahraman. And then the whole plan would collapse. Therefore, he decided to act through someone to whom the ringing of a coin meant much more than the king's word.

Tutak, in addition to his share of the treasure and the power promised by Haraz, put forward another condition. He had a son, a young man of sixteen years old, named Farang. His father was dissatisfied with the fact that his son did not show any special talents, did not follow in his father's footsteps, but only sweetly lived at his expense. He wanted him to taste real life, even if dangerous, but adventures. Of course, he asked Haraz to look after him, but he still wanted to teach him a lesson and make him a man.

Haraz assured Tutak that he would make every effort to fulfill the merchant's will and almost personally look after him. In fact, he had never said that he would go on a trip with the Prince himself - he kept this intention in the strictest confidence. But he said that he would send the most trusted and responsible people on the trip, so Tutak did not have to worry about the fate of his son. The merchant was so pleased with their deal that he promised Haraz to find the best captain and senior sailors in all of Babylon and to involve them in the journey free of charge.

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Finding Iman was not an easy task. Navida had to learn another side of the city's life. The dirt of its night streets, the secrets of dark

alleys and the poorest neighborhoods full of cripples, drunkards, thieves and harlots. It turned out that Iman had been sheltered by a man named Rahim, a good-natured, pleasant man who had lost his son and wife, but who had not lost heart. He lived very poorly, and so when Navid approached Iman with a proposal, Iman gladly accepted it, but put forward a condition that Rahim would go with them. If their journey is successful, then he will finally be able to leave the slums and spend his old age in prosperity and peace.

Rahim was loved and respected even in places like this, a haven for robbers, scoundrels, and runaway slaves. Perhaps it was also because he simply had nothing to take. All he was rich in was a kind heart and a thin shirt and pants. And its corner, which he called home, was hardly an enviable dwelling. He felt free from everything, and this freedom could not be taken away. But Iman wanted to thank Rahim and give him what he really deserved.

Navid did not object to such an offer, but still made sure that he would be useful in battle. Iman hastened to assure Navid that Rahim had served in the palace guard in the past and knew how to handle weapons, even despite his age. In addition, close to street life, he knows and promised to bring a fighter, the winner of dozens of tournaments, who has been looking for a worthy opponent for a long time. His name was Arsalan, and he fought like a lion. He simply had no equal, but this success played a cruel joke on him - he constantly hoped that there would be someone or something that would make him really sweat. A worthy, equal opponent and their fight - this was what interested him. For this, he was ready to go to the end of the world.

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Meanwhile, preparations for the festivities were in full swing in the palace. Shahraman ordered to decorate the largest hall in the palace. Tables were set up everywhere, artists and musicians rehearsed their numbers for days to perform on the appointed evening. But Shahraman wanted more. He wanted all Babylon to celebrate with him. Stages for traveling artists were set up everywhere in the city, and in tents nearby on the day of the festivities, drinks and treats were distributed to everyone from the very morning. Shahraman was ready to spend anything so that the shadow of the recent war faded and evaporated from people's memories. He was incredibly irritable these days. So much so that even the Prince stopped trying to reach his mind and convince him of the reality of the danger. And I just waited for the celebration with the others. But, of course, for a completely different reason. On this

day, the escape for which he had been preparing for so long was to take place.

The prince secretly handed over all the necessary things to the ship, including clothes and weapons. Haraz helped him in everything, and if the Prince had a slightly clearer mind, he would certainly wonder why he would do this. But instead, he continued to drown in the abyss of gloomy thoughts, unable even to pretend to play along with the general mood of the approaching holiday. And even more - the idea of this feast was disgusting to him. So many people died! Those whom he knew personally, for example, Darius. He gave his life for the Prince! And, unfortunately, all this was the consequence of his fatal mistake. He wanted to save not only himself, but also his soul. There was too much blood on her. So much so that even he, accustomed to looking death in the face and beating up to his elbows in blood, was unbearably hard.

At the same time, the Prince was burdened by the fact that he went against his father's will. He knew that he was right, that there was no other way, but, in fact, he was a traitor, a rebel! The conspiracy that had grown in the shadow of the palace vaults had spread to the streets and attracted many others. It poisoned their hearts like poison, and they went to the crime with fire in their eyes and prepared for the journey. Even if for completely different reasons, more or less mercenary: some were driven by a thirst for profit, others by a craving for adventure. Whatever exactly led them, they were all part of a conspiracy against the will of the tsar. And there was no way back. And no one was looking for him. Everyone's eyes were fixed on their own desired goals.

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"Everything will happen today," Haraz said to the Prince when the Prince came to him in the early hour.

"What do I need to do?" The Prince asked.

"As before, just wait. And be ready, because there will be only one moment and you will need to act decisively, without delay and hesitation," Haraz said, adding: "Everything is in force: both the place and the ship. It will be late at night and everything should go smoothly.

Tutak [*note: from the Persian name "Toutak/Tutak", meaning "chest of money"*], the merchant who generously provided a ship for the journey, was to attend the festivities – Haraz had taken care of this – and to give the signal when everything was ready to sail. No one would suspect anything, for both would celebrate with the others and would never be out of sight. the final touch in it was his intention to go on a journey with the Prince. After all, he also had his own goal,

for the sake of which he was ready to renounce anything - his position, wealth. He failed to overthrow the power of Shahraman with an Indian attack, which means that unprecedented and incredibly powerful magic will help him in this.

"Just don't tell anyone on the team about your true purpose. Most likely, they won't understand you," Haraz added after the Prince left.

Chapter 7. Feast

I decided to take the first steps to turn Peski from a personal miracle into a common good. Unlike my dreams, the Island was full of real, living people who were just waiting to enter a new beautiful life full of discoveries. Although, perhaps, they themselves did not know about it yet. But Fate is inevitable, inevitable and... Beautiful! My goal is to reveal a great secret to people. Gradually, just like I myself once did, they will get acquainted with this great gift, and everything will finally change, certainly for the better. After all, all that I and my people have known for centuries is slow decay and decline, we lived in the shadow of great but long-gone eras, of which there are almost no memories, except for the ruins of the castle in the center of the Island. Who knew that such a thing was hiding among these ruins?

It was necessary to start with a few people. Perhaps even one. And it could well be my son. It was time to show him the power of Fate, which had loosened the grip of death on my neck and given me a new life. A fate that was permeated with the knowledge of my ancestors and my future achievements. Knowing her in advance, I was as if out of time. I lived in the past and the future at the same time. And I saw what I was striving for in the present. The prosperity of the Island was what I could see with a slight squint in this still bright enough light of the Sands. The future was shining, it was beautiful and perfect, but still quite vague – I still know how to handle this knowledge very poorly. They are in front of me, you just need to stretch out your hand. But it seemed that they were sometimes written in an unknown, long-forgotten language, and the meaning of each word I had yet to find in a long and sometimes painful search.

I was very worried, afraid that something would go wrong in the presence of another person. That it turns out that I am the only one who sees all this. Or the Abyss will not reveal its secrets to the "outsider". But everything went as usual, only this time I didn't even have to use the locket. It was enough that I squeezed it in my hand without throwing it into the void. The light of the Sands, as before, instantly covered everything around.

I don't know if Nergal was able to see what I did, but he left in deep thought. I will not rush him - I am sure all this needs to be thought over and weighed. I will obediently await his return, but in the meantime I will continue my research in the infinity granted by the Sands.

Namtar's Journal, Entry 10

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The festive evening, which marked the victory, promised to be noisy and merry. Not only nobles and military commanders, but also all the city nobility were invited to the celebration. Famous people, among whom were rich merchants, priests and heads of respected families. The recent victory of Persia was an extraordinary and even great event. The grandeur of this evening was designed to show this greatness and fix it in the minds of people - the celebration spread even beyond the walls of the palace.

Shahraman was in an unusually good mood that day, gladly greeted the guests, personally meeting them in the center of the large hall. Rows of tables were placed on it, but in such a way that there was enough free space in the center - a festive performance was planned. Servants ran everywhere, serving food and pouring drinks.

The hall itself was simply huge - it could accommodate a small army. It seemed that he was specially created for this kind of technique. The massive vaults were supported by round white columns with spirally twisted patterns. Along the walls there were many arches that served as entrances, and their tops were decorated with a striped pattern - alternating burgundy and white. Flags of Persia with the image of an eagle were hung everywhere. Night was approaching, and therefore the torches were already lit - the hall was well lit. In the huge windows, planted with greenery and flowers, the lights of a huge city could be seen.

"Please, come in!" Shahraman said to almost every one of the guests.

He knew many of those who came well, respected and highly appreciated them. Thanks to them, Babylon and Persia grew, and with it their power.

The king's table was located at a distance, on a special elevation, preceded by marble steps. It was facing the hall, so that the eye could cover almost the entire area. In addition to Shahraman, the place at the table was occupied by the Prince, Tuammak, Haraz, several dignitaries and the most loyal of the satraps of the great king. One place was empty - what the dead Darius would now occupy.

–Friends! Shahraman said solemnly, rising to his seat when all the guests had gathered. "Today is an important day!" Great Persia has become even stronger! For centuries, our victories will be glorified, songs and legends will be formed about them. But we are especially honored to be here and now to celebrate this moment!

Shahraman picked up a glass of wine from the table and drank it almost in one fell swoop, loudly lowering it back. All the others followed his example with joyful shouts.

Shahraman smiled sweetly and added:

"Let the great feast begin in the name of our victory!"

Then he immediately sat down in his chair and began to eat the chicken leg that was already on his plate. The day was hard, he spent a lot of energy and therefore greedily bit into the meat. His attention was dulled, his mind was completely immersed in the atmosphere of general merriment, and he did not notice the little things that happened here and there: somewhere a glass of wine fell to the floor with a clink, and someone could not sit on a chair and fell from it to everyone's laughter. For Shahraman, all this was completely unimportant. They were the sounds of celebration, they couldn't be different. Everything was going as it should, Shahraman thought. He did not even notice that the Prince sitting next to him was in a bad mood and could hardly find the strength for another forced smile.

His thoughts were not occupied with victory or celebration. The prince thought about what had happened to him and Darius there on the top of the hill. Dahaka, the nightmare that had haunted him all these years, finally caught up with him. But the Prince managed to escape. Did he act cowardly? Darius wholeheartedly rushed to the Prince's defense, but he hesitated. He knew who was in front of him and knew perfectly well that he simply had nothing to oppose to the monster. A meeting with him is certain death. But Darius would never retreat and run away. And the Prince fled, taking the chance. How long will this last? Is it possible that he will run from his death like this all his life, being in constant fear and despair? And, if at that time he had any doubts and hopes about this, then after meeting with Zoroaster, he finally realized everything. Dahaka will never stop chasing him. Once the Prince tore the fabric of time with a dagger and now, like a wounded beast, it chased him, wanting revenge. The death sentence has been signed and the executioner has already raised his axe. His death is only a matter of time. Zoroaster's words stuck firmly in the Prince's head:

"You cannot change your fate. No man can do that," he told the Prince at the time.

They literally killed him. They destroyed the hope in him, grasping at which, the Prince was still looking for a way out. At least some way to avoid the inevitable. All this took away the Prince's strength, literally squeezing all the juice out of him. He was tormented by headaches and constant nightmares. A sense of hopelessness was eating away at him, from the inside and even from the outside—he had looked sickly and exhausted in recent months. So even now, when he had a timid hope again—a trip to the Island promised him a chance to do something truly effective in solving his problem—he could not find the strength to rejoice at the chance. Death, which followed the Prince on his heels, seemed to have sucked the life out of him so much that the question arose - did he have

anything to fight for? In addition, he was especially burdened by the way his own father treated him and his idea. He was now honoring the Prince as a hero, as a great conqueror, a true hero of Persia, but the Prince remembered that conversation very well. How sharply Shahraman opposed the Prince's journey and what measures he took against it. And this made the Prince feel even more burdensome, he felt almost like a traitor. That night, he will have to disobey the will of his father, the king of Persia, and arrange his own escape. But he had a choice - it is not known when another such chance will present itself and, perhaps, he no longer has time left. One day, the monster will catch up with him, right here, on the doorstep of his own house. Where he felt like a prisoner. Babylon became his prison.

The people invited to the party, meanwhile, were carelessly having fun, which angered the Prince, spoiling his already terrible mood even more. He sat with clenched teeth, trying not to show his mood. Food did not attract him - his appetite had left him a long time ago. The prince had to eat only to maintain his strength. He only frantically moved his spoon over his plate, and occasionally forcefully put something in his mouth. All he had to do was wait for Haraz's signal. This is all that the Prince was here for and endured this evening.

The holiday went on as usual, people had fun. From time to time, someone made speeches, everyone raised their glasses. Here and there laughter and loud conversations could be heard. Most of them were idle and frivolous. Some, on the contrary, tried to talk about business and even build new acquaintances. The situation was also quite suitable for this.

Seizing the moment when Shahraman left the table and walked down the hall, overwhelmed with merriment, and Tuammak was distracted to shake the crumbs from his black beard (despite his age, he still did not have a single gray hair!), Tutak nodded to Haraz. The moment was perfect - Shahraman distracted the attention of the crowd, it was noisy and bustling around - no one would have paid attention to this fleeting gesture. But Haraz waited for him, almost without taking his eyes off Tutak. A moment before, one of the servants had approached the latter with instructions to give him an imperceptible signal, which meant that everything was ready. And now Haraz himself knew about it. Everything was going according to plan, the noisy holiday was only to their advantage. Now all that remained was to wait for another convenient moment to inform the Prince and help him slip away from the palace unnoticed.

All these days, the Prince felt as if he was in a dungeon. As a criminal, he is imprisoned and without the permission of the king, he will not be able to leave it. And he did not want to listen to the Prince. And an even greater punishment for him was the prison of his

own mind. It was as if he had been left to rot in a dirty and stinking basement, without sunlight and other people, so gloomy and desperate were his thoughts. The Prince spent every morning in agonizing anticipation of the executioner, waking up before sunrise. Although, maybe it would have been even better - a few moments and the end of all torment. But his mind was sophisticatedly unhurried. Day after day, the prince was drowning in the whirlpool of his consciousness, he did not know where to go, where to run away from his own thoughts. It seemed another second, and he would literally choke on them. Once a cool forest lake helped him a lot, after bathing in which, he felt an extraordinary lightness. But it won't work a second time. The Prince's consciousness, which had been almost as clear and unclouded, now turned into a swamp that sucked him deeper and deeper. And nothing would help him, he was suffocating, his only salvation was the opportunity to escape. He didn't want to run away from his father. Not from his fate or even death itself in the person of Dahaki. He wanted to run away from himself.

And yet the Prince still wanted to live. I wanted to fight. Man still existed in it, lived. Right in the place where it already seemed impossible. Where everything was wiped and scorched by darkness and despair. And this man could still stand on his feet and even run forward. Most likely, not due to circumstances, but in spite of them.

Wanting to live, the Prince was afraid of death. This is what gave him strength, did not allow him to give up on everything, to give up. He was literally forced to at least run, until he could think of something better, with an almost animal fear, powerless in the face of his killer. Before his fate. Her hands are already literally clutching at his throat and are ready to strangle the Prince, to sweep him to shreds - to consign him to complete and absolute oblivion. Therefore, he decided on an absolutely desperate, impossible act - to try to change his fate. When faced with death, a person will hardly consider impossibility as an obstacle in his path. Rather, it will be a kind of opportunity, a chance. Maybe even a challenge.

Of course, the Prince was well aware that you could not hide from Dahaki in a forest lake, under the water column, no matter how deep you dived. No matter how far you run, no matter how well you hide. We need something much more effective. It was the cold and calculating mind that suffocated him with gloomy thoughts that was his best friend and only savior. Especially now, when it seems that even close people have turned away from him. He alone had to bear responsibility for his mistakes, he could only rely on himself. Although without a good ship and crew, he will not get to the Island. This means that you will have to make some sacrifices and concessions. He will still need help.

The waning moon floated over the city, its delicate silvery glow illuminating the roofs of the houses. And the dark, thick night seemed to beckon the Prince, calling him somewhere. As if nature itself was helping him to carry out his plans now. Under the cover of night, it is much easier for him to get out of the city unnoticed and find himself on a ship. The prince wanted to rush to the nearest balcony right now, which was located not far from his desk, jump down and run. But he had to wait. The prince was deep in his thoughts, he did not follow the course of the evening at all, he lost track of time and looked at the night sky and the moon with much greater interest.

At one point, Shahraman looked sideways, nodded a few times, and made a couple of gestures. It's time to liven up the evening and put on the performance promised at the beginning of the festivities. He stood up and clapped his hands slowly but loudly several times, attracting the attention of the guests. Some of them were almost dozing, some were drunk. The conversations gradually subsided, people were full and tired. But Shahraman wanted to prolong this evening, so that it would not be some ordinary event, but would really be remembered by everyone.

The performance began with a dance of concubines. At Shahraman's signal, they went to the center of the hall and, to the rhythmic music of timpani and santur, began their performance. Their movements were graceful and smooth, the dancers' hands seemed to slide through the air. All the elements were performed by them almost simultaneously, which turned the dance into a charming spectacle, some kind of magical action. The guests perked up and enthusiastically watched the performance. At some point, it became clear that this was just a prelude. The kettledrums and santur died down and the hall was filled with the sounds of the lute, and the leading dancer came out with her. Her outfit was brighter than that of the others - she was assigned a special role in the dance. Her movements now set his mood, the others only echoed her. In her dance, she paid special attention to facial expressions and hands. Sometimes she used a large handkerchief made of translucent fabric, which magically disappeared from her hands, then returned to her. At the end of the dance, the girl, spinning, slowly sank to the floor, bowed her head and closed her eyes. A handkerchief that appeared out of nowhere fell smoothly from above and covered her shoulders. The sounds of music died down and the rest of the dancers recoiled silently. There was a silent pause - even the girl's breathing was heard, which she diligently restrained. And a few seconds later - a flurry of enthusiastic applause, approving exclamations and smiles from the guests of the evening. But the girl only modestly lowered her gaze, got up with a slight movement and hurried away, leaving the guests with a feeling of understatement and magic.

Shahraman, no less enchanted by the dance than the guests, waited for the crowd to calm down and motioned to one of the servants to announce the next number. It was supposed to be a surprise for Shahraman himself, a kind of gift to the king. In absolute silence, a middle-aged man stepped into the hall. His robes betrayed him as a commoner, but it was not his appearance that caught the attention of the guests, but his voice. In front of them stood a famous city poet who deliberately led a wandering lifestyle. In order for his poems to always be full of power and truth, he considered it simply necessary to endure deprivation, experience torment and see life without embellishment. "A real poet must be hungry," he said.

His voice was strikingly different from the image of a downtrodden poor man. He had strength, agility and at the same time sensuality. The lines he read seemed simple, but at the same time they were capacious and truthful, bold. Maybe even too much. Farnud – that was his name – loved Persia dearly. He saw it from all sides - he was familiar with the life of the poor with all its horrors, but he often had the opportunity to perform in the houses of the nobility. And he put all his experience into his poems. His poem today was entirely devoted to Persia and his love for it. He spoke on behalf of a beggar in the street, who rejoiced that he was protected from the sands of the desert and enemies by the walls of a great city and the army of a wise king, who did not see his sufferings because of hunger and poverty; or on behalf of the noble nobles who were grateful to fate for a carefree, well-fed life. And at some point, Farnud spoke on behalf of Shahraman himself, that he addressed the deity of light with words of gratitude and in search of higher wisdom. He touched on the topic of time - its greatness and power. Creative and destructive. And about how people overcome this element, building huge cities that have stood for centuries. About how people die, but at the same time manage to give rise to a new life, thereby creating eternity. Bit by bit, at the cost of hard work, faith and courage, they create something indestructible and great. And human creations grow not only in breadth, but also in height, soaring to the heavens. And all this was placed in one poem. It seemed that the poet was not going to finish his performance at all. His words intoxicated the crowd like wine, stirred the heart and mind, and therefore he was forgiven some liberties. Great country – great poets! Shahraman was known as a merciful ruler and would never be angry with the poet for a few careless phrases. A certain set of freedoms, even for conquered peoples – not to mention the Persians – is something that the king considered simply necessary and self-evident for the prosperity of a great country.

Only Haraz did not share the general delight of the poet's words. He was well aware that he had either been forced or bribed to do so.

The words seemed to him to be fake, something that everyone would like to hear and only remotely similar to the truth. Is it possible that no one notices this except him? Haraz could hardly contain his indignation, but hardly anyone would have understood him. The trick worked, and the guests were extremely pleased. Well, maybe it's the late night and the wine that make people weaker.

And again, the performance ended in absolute silence. This time the silence lasted even longer than the previous one. The poet's words penetrated into the hearts and minds of people, imbued them with special feelings and thoughts. Shahraman literally froze in mute delight. After a while he rose in silence and walked over to Farnud, shook hands with him, and bowed, a sign of special, even exceptional, reverence. He seemed to be somewhat surprised, although he hid it in every possible way. At this moment, the guests finally applauded and to a standing ovation, the poet left the hall, and Shahraman returned to his seat.

The prince did not pay any attention to what was happening. The noise was replaced by silence and vice versa, merging into a monotonous, incomprehensible hum. He did not even pay attention to the poet, when the latter's words were clearly addressed to the Prince:

Will not destroy the father's great undertakings,
But the most worthy son will multiply!

His thoughts were far from here. He wasn't just in another place or time, he seemed to be in another life. His glassy gaze was fixed on the tall window that overlooked the city at night. The moon hung high in the sky, cold and distant. Unattainable, like the other life that the Prince dreamed of. He wondered what would have happened to him if he had not discovered the Sands. How could his life have turned out? Would he waste years chasing the ghostly shadow of the past? Would he have become what he was now, or would he have been a completely different person?

He could have remained the same pompous young man who seeks only honor and glory. His father would have been proud of him, without questioning his abilities. There would be no frequent quarrels between them. All these seven years he would have gained wisdom and would have been preparing to become a worthy successor to his father. His life would be peaceful, if only because he would choose his own enemies. Dahaka would not pursue him, keeping him in constant fear.

He wouldn't have known Farah... So what? He would not have known this torment, this disgusting feeling, when it seemed that his heart was rotting alive and his love was turning from something

beautiful and bright into a pile of rubble, ruins. A huge black whirlwind that poisons thoughts, instills anxiety and immense sadness. Why does he need all this? Sometimes he thought he hated Farah. For what she did to him, how she tortured him. No, of course, she had nothing to do with it personally - these were only his own thoughts and feelings. Their abyss dragged the Prince in, and each time he was able to get out of it with more and more difficulty. Fate over the years did not give him anything good. He even had a latent desire to surrender to her and die. He was afraid to admit it to himself. But he was so tired of the eternal chase, of the struggle with himself and his memories. And I'm no less tired of all these "what ifs?" Why is he bathing in his dreams again, is it really possible to invent another life so vividly and strongly that it will become a reality? Even a dagger with its amazing capabilities would not help here.

A couple of minutes passed after the poet's performance, and when the guests came to their senses, the sounds of a lute playing a lyrical motif were heard in the hall. At first, its sound was timid and lonely. Then it was joined by the second lute. Her melody echoed first. Then, suddenly, both fell silent, became barely audible, and the shrill music of the kamancha poured out. But the main part was played by a young maiden, who joined with the song a little later. She sang a charming ballad about lost love, in which the girl had been looking for her lover for many years. She did not give up hope to the last, cherished it in her heart, but was afraid to tell anyone about it, so she secretly went into the desert in the evening and poured out her soul to her only friends - the fire and the dark night. Sometimes she wanted to sing or dance, and sometimes she just mumbled and cried senselessly.

The guests did not accept the song so unanimously - someone was frankly bored, someone continued to eat. There were also those who liked it - they listened fascinated, detached from conversations. But most of all it touched the king - Shahraman could hardly hold back a tear, his heart beating with a vengeance. That muffled feeling that he had been carefully hiding from himself awoke in him again. Each line of the song gave him both pain and pleasure at the same time. He involuntarily closed his eyes, imagined something, and his heart was filled with warmth. But as soon as he opened them, he felt sad. When the song ended, Shahraman was unable to say anything. Some thought he had fallen asleep altogether. And I was not at all delighted with the song. The musicians hurriedly left, and the guests again began to talk animatedly to each other, occasionally glancing at Shahraman.

One of the musicians stumbled while leaving the hall, which caused general laughter. Tuammak, who was pretty tipsy, burst out

laughing and slapped the Prince on the shoulder in an impulse, pulling him out of the captivity of illusions. When he found himself in this world again, the Prince smiled forcefully, not fully understanding what was happening, and looked at his father.

He sat motionless. Only a few minutes later did he stand up and once again thank everyone in the room. Then he added:

"And now it's time for something special. Persia is famous for the strength of its warriors, their skill and dexterity. So see them in all their glory!

A dozen Persian warriors poured into the middle of the hall - not just any actors, but real soldiers, in uniform and with weapons. The conversations died down - everyone was waiting for what they were going to see this time.

Haraz realized that there was no better chance and turned to the Prince:

"Dear Prince, would you be so kind as to give me that dish!"

"Wouldn't it have been easier to ask me?" Tuammak, who was sitting next to him, asked.

"But wasn't it the Prince who brought us a great victory?" I want to accept a treat from his hands! Haraz answered.

This answer silenced Tuammak, and the Prince, still not fully awake from his dreams, slowly took the dish and handed it to Haraz. The latter, feigning awkwardness, dropped the contents of the dish directly on Tuammak. He indignantly jumped up from his seat and began to shake off the remnants of his food. Haraz hastened to take advantage of these few seconds of confusion, pulled the Prince to him by the arm and whispered to him:

"Everything is ready, the ship is waiting for you. To leave unnoticed, do what I say.

Meanwhile, Tuammak had coped with his troubles and was already happily sitting down.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm so awkward. I will definitely find a way to make amends," Haraz said.

Tuammak waved his hands away, he was not offended. Moreover, he was more interested in what was beginning to happen in the hall. War was his life, now it was also to become an art. Not only for him, but also for others - they will be able to see her through his eyes.

Meanwhile, Haraz stood up and said:

"Forgive me for interfering, but it seems to me that the performance will be incomplete without another great warrior!"

The prince immediately understood what Haraz was getting at, the mosaic came together. He felt a great reluctance to play the role assigned to him, but at the same time he understood that he had no

choice. The plan was set in motion, and the Prince was part of it. There was too much at stake, so he would just have to obey.

"Prince, I beg you, take your rightful place among the brave and mighty sons of Persia. This is your destiny! Kharaz finished his thought.

Shahraman was delighted with the idea, and Tuammak slammed his hand on the table, saying:

"Why didn't it occur to me myself?"

And then he added:

"Well, Prince, come on! You deserve it!

The prince overcame his reluctance, got up from the table, and went down to the other warriors. He didn't know exactly what he was going to do, but he could already feel the excitement that came over him every time he took up the hilt of his sword. He did not have his own swords with him, they were already waiting for him on the ship. Now at the holiday, no one seemed suspicious that he was unarmed. Someone handed him the blades, and now he was ready. In addition, the Prince was fueled by the belief that a carefully planned deception was working - after a vigorous performance with swords, he would have an excellent excuse to leave. He will have just enough time to sneak past the guards and escape before they get him. Having finished thinking with this thought, he got down to business.

Battle had always been something special for him. Something in which he plunged headlong, rebuilding his mind in a special way. He devoted himself entirely to this dance of death, turning his whole body into a weapon, often guided by reflexes alone. And although now he was not facing a real battle, but only an imitation of it, a game for the public, he was serious. He exchanged a few words with the rest of the warriors, agreed on something with them, and stepped forward, about to say something to those around him. Stopping, he waited for a few seconds, seeing that all eyes were on him, and, throwing one hand up, roared:

"For Persia!"

And it had an incredible effect, just what he had hoped for: the crowd roared after him, and there were pops and whistles. Meanwhile, the warriors who stood behind the Prince began their main program: sharpened, powerful sword swings, deft movements, and subtle playing, all together it resembled a kind of dance. But it didn't look fake – even Haraz's face showed obvious interest – all these warriors were specially selected from the king's army. Their movements were the same as in battle, they were thought out to the smallest detail. The prince was not superfluous among them, because he even had a chance to fight side by side with someone not long ago.

At some point, the warriors parted, and the attention of the audience switched to the Prince - he had to show himself alone,

without the support of allies and brothers in arms. And he immediately ceased to be part of the squad, acting like everyone else. His talent as a warrior was now revealed in full glory. He could do even more than these excellent soldiers. He was faster and more sophisticated, his swords barely visible, so fast they flashed, obeying the movements of his body. It either rotated like a whirlwind - no enemy could approach it, or deftly rolled or performed dizzying pirouettes. And all this in conjunction with predatory, deadly blows of swords. Trying to surprise everyone even more, he suddenly decided, unexpectedly for himself, to try something new: he sped up a little, spinning around him, leaned on one hand, raised both legs above his head and, using inertia and shifting his arms, dealt several fatal blows to an imaginary enemy. His movement looked very impressive to the guests - none of them had seen anything like it before. None of the audience could even imagine that such a thing was possible. In addition, it was so rapid that no one was able to examine it in sufficient detail, but on the whole, the impression was that something incredible had happened. It was this that made the crowd of spectators explode again. Many jumped up from their seats to come closer and take a better look at everything. Shahraman had to stand up to see over their heads. The prince repeated the movement a couple more times.

"If they like it so much," he thought. However, he liked it himself. Perhaps this was even the main reason for the repetitions.

Soon, after making a couple more jumps and somersaults, the Prince decided that it was time to finish. He motioned for the crowd to step aside and called one of the soldiers, whom he had managed to warn in advance. He folded his hands, making a support for the Prince. The latter ran away, put his foot in the hands of the soldier and, thrown up, spun, putting out his swords, simultaneously around his axis and performing a double somersault. After landing, he continued to rotate for a while, after which he dropped to one knee, rested the tips of his swords on the floor and froze.

He remembered the last moments as if in a fog - the roar of the crowd, the explanation with his father almost in gestures and the coolness of the night that touched his shoulders when he stepped out into the air. They were waiting for him back, thinking that he would swim in the pool and return to the solemn end of the festivities, when everyone was finally fed up with food and spectacles. And Shahraman was preparing to make an important announcement at the end of the evening, as soon as the Prince returned. But he was not going to return. At the last moment, Haraz managed to whisper to him:

"You're being watched. The double is waiting for you by the pool, behind the third pillar.

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About half an hour later, Kharaz turned to Shahraman:

"It seems that something has happened. The prince has been gone for too long.

Slightly tipsy and sleepy, he suddenly perked up and said:

"Is it really now?" Do you think he's after all...

"I think it's too early to sound the alarm, but it's better to be on the alert. I will personally go in search of him," Haraz replied.

He got up from the table, gestured for his bodyguards, Naysir and Madid, and hurried away. He had very little time left to get on the ship, which would pick him up at the agreed place, not far from the city.

Shahraman stared after Haraz for a few seconds, and then got up from the table and went back to his chambers, in a bad mood. One of the guests noticed his departure and took it as a farewell and an offer to end the holiday, and soon, one by one, not counting the dead drunks and those who fell asleep right on the table, the guests began to leave the main hall.

Chapter 8. Journey

Nergal came back to me this morning, saying:

"I'm glad you're not sick anymore, father. But unfortunately, you're blind now...

It took me a while to find an answer. Perhaps my choice was unfortunate:

"I have seen what you have yet to learn, my son.

To which he replied:

"I've seen enough. This place is dying, and you've completely lost your mind. But if this was forgivable for a sick, dying person, then now I do not find any explanation. Don't you know that people are increasingly dying from unknown diseases? Children are born weak and feeble. The land is increasingly stingy with crops. We are one of the last generations, perhaps the most recent. Are you talking about fate? This is just an attempt to find some kind of justification, an explanation for this accident. After all, those who live closer to the ruined castle are less likely than others to live to old age! Your constant walks in an abandoned garden are where your illness comes from. And now you suddenly hope for the light from the abyss and the warmth that it radiates! I don't know what kind of miracle happened to your body, but now your mind is sick! How can you lead the Island to prosperity by losing your sanity and blindly trusting to chance?

Then Nergal turned and walked away.

–Wait! I called out to him.

"I was going to do it anyway—I want to leave this place!" Nergal replied without turning around.

Namtar's Journal, Entry 12

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The prince ran as fast as he could. He escaped from the chase through narrow dark streets, diving into the alleyways and hiding in the shadows. But the darkness was inexorably chasing him. Dahaka found him here in Babylon! And now he was chasing the Prince, sweeping away everything in his path, turning any obstacle into a mountain of splinters and shards. The beast's strength was so great that it seemed that it could reduce the entire city to rubble. And the Prince couldn't do anything about it. No weapon, no sword is able not only to defeat the monster, but even to cause him at least some harm.

The prince was at the limit of his strength. How much longer can he hold out? It seems that this chase does not cause trouble to the animal at all. Not only did he keep up, but he ran faster and faster with every second. In the darkness, only the red lights of his

eyes were visible. Everything around was covered with a black, thick fog, which was about to grab the Prince by the leg and drag him into oblivion, into the abyss of timelessness and oblivion. The Prince's mind was feverishly trying to think of something, some way out, but with each step he took, it only became more and more imbued with despair and hopelessness. Reality was fragmented into fragments, fragments that had no connection with each other. Feelings and thoughts rushed past like birds of prey, not having time to linger even for a moment.

Jump. It's cold. Running. It's cold. Horror follows on his heels. The mind is blurred. Just don't stop! Grit your teeth and run on! Forward. Rightwards. Left. At random! Wall... It's cold. I will not give up! It's cold...

Dahaka had driven the Prince into a dead end, and there were only moments left before his death. And then suddenly he woke up. This dream had been haunting him for more than one night. But it was already the fourth day of sailing, and the Prince was in relative safety. He managed to escape, exactly according to Haraz's plan. The deception worked, the Prince was able to avoid all patrols and ambushes and, under the cover of night, reached the ship. Apparently, his dangerous nocturnal adventure had mixed with his main fear and was now haunting him in his dreams in its distorted form.

The voyage was led by Taufan, an experienced captain, who was provided by Tutak along with the ship. He had two excellent sailors in his service: Haadin and Hafes. Together they went on many dangerous journeys and were ready for any challenge. The prince explained to them how to get to their final destination, repeating exactly the words of Zoroaster. In total, the journey should have taken about two weeks.

The prince ceased to regret disobeying his father's will. He managed to extinguish the feeling of guilt by understanding that he would either not return at all, or change everything, rewriting his fate. And then he would find himself in a completely different world, which he did not want to think about yet. He did not want to solve problems that did not yet exist.

The morning after his escape, the Prince found Haraz and his bodyguards on board. He was extremely surprised by this, because he never said a word about the fact that he was going on this trip. The prince, of course, asked him why he had gone with him.

"We've walked so many roads side by side, we've been so far from home, and we've done so much together, that I couldn't let you go alone, my Prince. Who knows what will happen there, on the Island? You may need my help," Haraz replied.

The prince did not pay attention to this and took it for granted. He had never had a reason to suspect Haraz of anything in his life, his reputation was impeccable. He had never failed him, and now he had literally saved him from certain death.

The voyage was calm and even too measured. The Prince had plenty of time to get to know the rest of the crew. In addition to those whom Haraz had told him about, there were several other people on the ship: a swarthy man named Mertash, originally from Arabia; Misaf, who was brought to the ship by a debt in the game, an unfulfilled promise and a desire to get rich.

Towards the end of the second week of sailing, the weather began to deteriorate. The sea was constantly stormy, the sky was covered with leaden clouds, a cold wind was blowing. It seems that the travelers were incredibly close to their goal, with one or two days of travel left. And with every hour the storm only intensified. And as if echoing her, the Prince's thoughts became more and more gloomy, he rarely left his cabin, did not speak to anyone, and on his soul lay the indelible imprint of imminent death, creeping like a black stain through his veins and climbing right into his heart.

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That night it seemed as if the wind and rain were tearing the ship apart, trying to stop it at any cost, throwing it from wave to wave, and mercilessly overwhelming the deck with endless streams of water.

Something similar was happening in the mind of the Prince. His thoughts, like the element of water, did not want to calm down. He thought about what had already happened, about what could or should happen.

Pulling himself together, he tried to reason sensibly. First of all, they only know the approximate course, which means that the ship can easily pass by, far from the Island, from its only goal. Secondly, he and his team knew absolutely nothing about the place where they were about to go, except for the incoherent fragmentary words of Zoroaster. But he knew that the Island was the birthplace of the Sands. And a place where there is Pisky cannot be good. The Prince's imagination pictured the most terrible monsters guarding the Island. He saw it as nondescript, vile, devoid of life, and immersed in the cold emptiness of eternity.

Perhaps he could not see anything clearer in his thoughts, so he threw on a hastily sewn cloak of thick but flexible fabric, and, pulling the hood over his head, stepped on the threshold of the night storm.

She did not greet him in a friendly manner. In an instant, she poured cold over me and poured rain. However, the Prince had been

waiting for this and was not surprised at all. It seemed to him that the whole world was against him, and he was already used to it.

There was impenetrable darkness all around, occasionally illuminated by flashes of lightning that literally tore out of the darkness the silhouettes of the crew members scurrying back and forth on the deck. The Prince had no one to talk to - everyone was either busy with more important matters, or were not those to whom he could tell something intimate or at least important. And it was impossible to speak with such a roar. Although for some reason he did not think about the noise. Rather, and there were reasons for that, he had forgotten how to talk to people. He became closed, detached, used to trusting only himself and his faithful swords.

To an uninitiated person, his swords seemed to be something extremely unusual. It was not just a weapon created to hurt and take life, but a work of art. Curved, they looked like a lunar moon, and were slightly longer than the Prince's arm. In the flashes of lightning they seemed to echo them, lit up with a cold silvery sheen, reminiscent of the shine of predatory eyes thirsting for blood. They seemed to be made for him, perfectly held in his hands, even during the most unexpected and difficult blows. And each one seems to have a character. These murderers could not have a soul, only a character, which was confirmed by the shape of the blade. One of them – with a wide, ornately patterned, unusually sharp blade with an unusual semicircular notch – vaguely resembled the claw of some mythical creature – a giant eagle or a griffin. More conspicuous, it looked more powerful and dangerous. The second was more inconspicuous. It was thinner, but part of the blade, closer to the hilt, was cut as if by the teeth that the most cruel predator has.

The prince had always kept them with him, ever since he found them in the armory of Shahran and set out on his long campaign. And even now, he was holding on to one of the swords with his hand. Some would even find it strange, but no one knew him well enough to tell him about it. He was cold to the whole world, and the world responded to him in the same way.

The wind was picking up. It was noticeable, despite the fact that he was already blowing with terrible force. The ship lurched to one side, then to the other, rose above the waves, and then, with the roar of thousands of cannons, fell to the water and flew up again and again. Nothing and no one could stop the wrath of the elements.

Now the waves mercilessly crashed on the deck, one after another, knocking people off their feet and almost carrying them away forever into the abyss. If anyone knew beforehand what they were going to do and where they were sailing, not one of them in their right mind would agree to it. There were no people who were not afraid of death. At least on this ship. But everyone was afraid of

her in different ways. Most of them are right now, at this moment. The prince looked proudly and calmly in the face of danger, for he knew that if he did not reach the Island, he would be punished by an even more monstrous death. When he saw her face once, he didn't want to look at it again. For the first time in his life, he was truly afraid. Although he was afraid to admit it to himself, he could not deceive himself.

The next strange thought, in time with the flash and the strongest peal of thunder: why is he holding swords in his hands? After all, there was no danger in the vicinity except for the storm, and it was simply pointless to fight it with such a weapon. Maybe they seemed to have sensed danger before him?

In the next instant, the Prince's face lit up with a bright flash, but it didn't disappear after a moment, as it usually happened with a flash of lightning. It was getting brighter and getting closer, flying towards him, or rather, somewhere nearby. It was a lit arrow. Piercing one of the masts, it continued to burn and even the rain could not extinguish the flames...

The prince was stunned. He was used to all kinds of surprises, but only when he faced them face to face, and at least knew who or what he was dealing with. In the next moment, lightning lit up the sky, and the Prince's gaze caught an even darker silhouette out of the monstrous darkness. Another ship. And the arrow was from the same place - there was simply nowhere else for it to come from.

And here is another arrow. He was already waiting for her. The prince threw off his cloak and shouted shrilly, calling everyone to arms, to battle the almost invisible enemy, raising his hand high into the air. It seemed that he managed to drown out all the sounds of the indignant elements, because everyone on the ship heard him and grabbed their weapons.

Part of the crew rushed to the cannons - the battle was going to be serious, from nowhere, but everyone understood this and was ready for it. Or he thought he was ready.

At first, the enemy was not visible, he was hiding in a veil of darkness, and they were as if in the palm of his hand: a few more arrows, cutting through the damp air with flames, crashed into the wood of the ship. All this happened under the incessant thunder and whistle of the wind. It seemed that the wind was not just blowing, it was beating, it wanted to kill or knock down, throw overboard, destroy, tear to shreds, sparing no effort of its own.

A little further away from the Prince, several people with lighted arrows lined up - they were waiting for another flash to clearly distinguish where to shoot them. The lightning was not long in coming. In the next moment, everything became clear. The target was clearly defined, several bows, as if on command, already aiming

at the sky, fired fire-breathing shells. It was foolish to hope that this would somehow embarrass the enemy, but it was a means of making a statement. Show bared teeth and predatory eyes. No pity. Neither to the storm, nor to the invisible and unknown enemy.

But the Prince felt that the team was afraid, there was a lot of determination in it, but something oppressed it. Being the calmest of all, he began to give orders:

"Shoot at them in such a way as to deprive them of the ability to swim fast and, even better, the ability to shoot. We may not be able to sink them, but by making it impossible for them to move, we can hide in the darkness and break away!

Then he signaled the archers to stop. They were embarrassed by this gesture, but they obeyed. There was no need to shoot into the void, wasting arrows. They have already indicated their belligerent mood - now this is enough.

Time froze, everyone plunged into anticipation. The other side was silent, and this inspired even greater fear in the crew, and it seems that it was not because it did not see the Prince's ship. It was waiting for the moment to shoot. Even before he saw the enemy in the face, the Prince felt his unusual cruelty, alien even to him.

The reflections of lightning a couple of times, revealing the secret of the night, revealed a dark silhouette. He was approaching. It was a ship, somewhat larger and, probably, faster - there was no chance of escape.

The enemy ship sailed closer and closer. The first shots of the cannons rang out. New flashes of lightning were added - from guns, from flaming arrows. The darkness seemed to dissipate, a large ship appeared from it, frightening anyone with its appearance. It soared higher than the Prince's ship, cutting the waves as a sword rips open the stomach of its prey. Strange patterns and two huge eyes could be seen on the sides. It seemed that it was with them that he saw through the darkness, tore it apart and scattered it away.

And now the waiting time is over. It flowed past like water overboard a ship. The enemy ship was now really close and clearly visible. Every gun. Every mast and every board. The flickering of some lights scurrying here and there. And a strange silhouette on the upper deck. The prince would have taken him for a captain, but the silhouette seemed to belong to a woman.

The sudden sound of a tree breaking – the planks shatter in agony under the crushing force of the shot. The ship shook perceptibly, not as the waves did, but much more violently. The return shot was not long in coming. From the other side, the same crack was heard. Or even some kind of screech - all the sounds mixed with the storm and either drowned in it, or changed beyond recognition.

Then the shots rained down like hail. There were splashes of water, occasional screams, thunderclaps interspersed with the sounds of gunshots or even merging with each other. Meanwhile, the ships also came closer to each other. The lights on the deck began to change. It seemed that they were always pairs and ran after dark silhouettes that flashed every now and then in flashes of lightning.

However, strange as it may seem, the attacking ship was never inflicted any serious damage. A few gaping holes in the hull and nothing more.

Things were much worse on the Prince's ship. One of the masts was seriously damaged. In addition, several cannonballs hit the hull of the ship near the water, so that it was now poured inward, little by little, but continuously, thanks to the waves whipping against the side of the ship.

The ships were approaching and the cannon shots were silent. The prince crushed the hilts of his swords. He longed for battle. He wanted to punish the enemy for such unheard-of audacity, whoever he was. He knew that the battle was inevitable, and so he wanted it even more.

The cracking of wood was heard again. Or rather, a creak or grinding. As if it was cut or twisted. Because of the thunder, it was impossible to make out by ear. But you could see that three hooks, wound together and moving away from each other, clung to everything they came across. Board. The very edge, but that was enough. Of course, a rope was tied to the hook. I heard the ringing of a few more blows - the same thing. The ship was boarded.

The team lined up, clutching weapons in their hands. The lights turned into eyes. This frightened everyone. It couldn't be eyes... But it happened. As if illuminated from within, they threw orange light into the darkness. But the strangest detail on the enemy soldiers were masks made of the skulls of some animals.

My heart was beating desperately. But the Prince acted, first of all, listening to his mind. His cold, calculating and ruthless friend. The heart was in the power of the Prince. He didn't listen to it, even when it called out to him with all its might, knocking desperately. But it is useless. His mind, like a veil over his eyes, emptied him and moved him.

By this time, the Prince's ship was already on fire - the lit arrows had done their job. This made things brighter, but not happier.

Another shot was fired. Luck illuminated everything around even brighter than lightning - a shell hit the mast of the enemy ship. She squinted, slowly and gracefully, unable to fall at once. A loud crack was heard. Then moments of silence, if it could be called silence. Then it hit the water, hitting the other broken end of the ship itself, shaking it hard, and slid into the water completely, losing sight

of it. This tremor was transmitted along the ropes and to the other ship, as if by strings.

The enemy ship became deprived of its former mobility and speed. It's time to hide. Run away from these lights. Dive into the frenzied, but as if native element of the storm. And the wind, as if sensing this change of mood, blew in a different way, pulling the ship forward, breaking the strings, which, bursting, emitted a desperate cry that frightened the wind. He ran away in fear and drove the ship, inflating the sails with all his strength.

In the eyes of each member of the team, one could read mortal horror. Under the flashes of fire, this horror became even more terrible for themselves, and it seemed that the fire was fed not by the wood of the ship, but by this fear, and burned more and more, despite the rain and the crew's vain attempts to extinguish the fire. It faded and flared up again, even stronger than before, like a mythical monster whose head was cut off, and a dozen new ones grew in its place.

The rain was lashing harder and harder, and the ship was already sinking. The water seemed to wish death to everything – the ship, the fire, and the people. Bubbling and foaming, the waves crashing against the side rose menacingly over the small vessel and then crashed down, dropping only a few drops on it. The enemy ship was left behind, it was already lost from sight. But suddenly it turned out that the wind had driven the ship into the heart of the whirlpool. Now he was tossed from side to side, the waves mercilessly beating against him, breaking into pieces, chipping boards, throwing overboard the poor fellows who did not have time to grab at least something. Now the ship was sinking for real, and there was nowhere for help to come. The ship's crew was left alone with their death, inevitable and terrible.

The Prince did not remember the last moments. And what happened was this: a coastal reef was exposed from under the water, sharp as the Prince's swords, and with incredible pleasure it bit into a tree. This breach was the last straw for the ship. A million others flowed through it. Everything was mixed in a single stream, it was simply impossible to make out anything, and there was no one to do it. The water was satiated to its heart's content, and now, happily circling on top of the ship it had swallowed up, it began to calm down.

And above, darkness thickened over all this, fettering the two fervent elements. The Prince's mind floated away, but he remained conscious for a while until he hit his head on a log.

Chapter 9. Island

Now I am in deep thought. I missed my usual morning hike to the Abyss. And now, it's already evening, but I'm not in a hurry to go there. The fact is that I did not see this moment in Peski, I did not see this conversation. Everything had to go wrong!

Of course, sitting here, I won't find the answers. But I can't find the right words, though I've tried to speak to Nergal a few more times. All in vain... It seems that he is beginning to hide from me - I have not seen my son for two days. And this means that all I have to do is go to the Abyss again for answers. It seems that I still have a lot to learn. After all, Fate is not a set of foggy visions, not someone's dream or fiction. This is what happens to a person, right here and now. All the joys and sorrows that he endures, the sacrifices that he has to make intentionally or forcefully – all this is part of it. But until now I had seen something completely obscure, only in rare fits and starts, looking behind the veil of mystery. Apparently, sacrifices are the first thing I'll have to put up with. Fate is cruel and this is one of its lessons. I have to look much more closely at these intricate sand swirls. I think the medallion can help me with this. If it worked like a key once, then I can use it to open all subsequent doors. But I will have to close the others behind me.

Namtar's Journal, Entry 13

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In these infinitely long minutes, hours, or even days, that the Prince spent in oblivion, he saw only disturbing dreams, restless, in which thoughts struggle with each other and deprive him of all peace. Once he saw that he was walking along a narrow ledge, but one random stone, falling under his foot, carried him away from this life and threw him into another. And these lives seem to be fighting with each other, and he lives them at the same time. The prince, acting as the main character, as if, at the same time, he was an outside observer. Outside of all this, he held a glass ball in his hand and watched what was happening inside. The ball was in his hands, in his power, but as he shook it, he shook himself as well. Power and at the same time dependence on oneself. And what if, to save his life, he throws the ball? Then he will destroy it, destroy it, snatching it from his own hands. And if he did not throw it, the ball might be an obstacle to the equilibrium that was now everything for him. Life itself. That is, life interfered... Life.

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The first real thing that the Prince felt was cold sand. He was lying on his back, so he saw the sky first. Reality caught him at the very moment when it seemed to be a vague, wild beast that sought to devour anyone with its huge jaws. Some voices buzzed in his head, his hands ached from fatigue. It seemed that they were still struggling with the elements, with the huge waves that were trying to drag him into the abyss. There was a taste of salty blood in his mouth. When he felt it, he vomited. He cleared his throat loudly and finally stood up and looked around. Seeing nothing, the Prince stood on his unsteady feet and approached the sea, finding it more by his sounds than by his eyes. He washed the dirt from his face and hair and only then was he able to open his eyes. Staggering, he wandered back. He paid attention to his clothes. It had managed to dry out a lot, only his feet were damp - he went into the water up to his knees without noticing it. His adventure promised to be unpleasant.

The next thing the Prince felt, the feelings came back to him reluctantly, like a lost memory, a feeling of stinging emptiness. Something was missing. He was himself and at the same time different. Deprived of something, some part of himself.

His swords were gone. Both! Swallowed up by the abyss. Not the most pleasant news, especially in such a place. He still hadn't forgotten what it was like to stand up to the Sands. Now he did not have a dagger, let alone his usual weapon. He was practically defenseless. The realization of all this fell on him like a huge wave falls on the deck of an unfortunate ship. Like a stream of icy water, endless and chilling to the bone. The Prince's legs buckled from the surprise. Already weak, they refused to obey at all. Resting his hands on the sand, he stopped his fall. In the next second, he felt another attack of nausea. Unable and unwilling to suppress it, the Prince opened his mouth and... Nothing happened. He vomited emptiness. A few drops of water from his hair fell onto the sand and onto his hands. The wind buzzed in his ears, and now the Prince's hearing returned. He heard some crackling. Then silhouettes and light loomed ahead. Orange! He recoiled, or rather, threw his hands behind his back and backed away, desperately throwing the sand away with his feet.

Then he understood everything and stopped. It was just a campfire and the people around it. The most important feeling returned to the Prince - reason. And with it - the absence of fear. Somewhat rash and presumptuous, but it helped him not to give up in any situation.

The people around the campfire, some of the lucky ones on his team who had escaped the elements like him, stopped, interrupted the conversation, and looked at him. They were alerted by his first

reaction, the way he crawled away, frightened by them. Maybe they thought he was mad. But then, seeing the first glimmer of reason in his eyes, they calmed down and went back to their business. Although it couldn't be said that any of them were too happy about the Prince's return. Their journey has only just begun, and so many terrible things have already happened. And since he is alive, it means that they will go further, towards new dangers.

The Prince did not immediately regain the ability to remember and instantly react to what was happening. Therefore, he did not remember how one of the people standing by the fire - I think it was Rahim - came up to him, stretched out his hand and helped him to get up. Getting up, the Prince walked with the same uncertain gait towards what had frightened him so much a moment ago.

The Prince recognized several more survivors: Towfan, the captain of the ship, his faithful and very skillful sailors - Haadin and Hafes, Iman, Navid and Farang - the son of a merchant, who bothered the Prince with stupid questions all the way. Naysir and Madid sat a little farther away, but Haraz was not with them. A minute later, Mertash came up to the fire and brought more firewood.

"You've been washed ashore quite recently. At first, everyone thought you were dead. But then you got up, approached us, and silently, warmed your hands over the fire and returned to your seat without saying a word. It looked rather strange," Rahim coughed loudly, putting his fist to his mouth. His cough echoed everywhere. He hit the high walls and rolled back, merging with the new sounds of coughing.

The prince wanted to mumble something in response. But his jaws and tongue did not obey him. Therefore, no one heard or saw anything but surprise in his eyes and a couple of incoherent sounds. He sat down heavily on the sand and felt the heat of the fire wash over him from head to toe. This calmed the Prince down a bit, and he allowed himself to relax a little.

The sky was still gloomy. It is not known how long ago the storm receded. Now the sea was calm - no wind, except for a light breeze, no waves. Well, and the tide, slowly but surely carving something known only to him from the coastal rocks. However, it seemed that the sun had never penetrated here, just as no man had set foot on some lands. Not once did its beam glide over these gray rocks, gray sand, gray water, gray walls. The prince noticed them for the first time. Something large towered about a hundred paces away. It was a high stone wall, which seemed to be very ancient - it was overgrown with moss and in some places fell apart or collapsed. Time did not spare her.

The only thing that brought at least some life to this grayness were the reflections of the fire, barely perceptibly flickering in the water, illuminating the faces of people who succumbed to the general grayness of this place, the sand and, it seemed, the air itself, filling it with heat and the pleasant aroma of burning wood. Yes, now it was warming and therefore pleasant. However, the remains of the ship, their recent saving island in the middle of the treacherous ocean, burned out in the flames. Now, whether they wanted it or not, this land had become such an island for them, absorbing the remnants of the previous one.

After sitting a little longer by the fire, the Prince, warming up, felt that, apart from the feeling of hunger, he had returned to a normal state, he could think coherently, walk evenly and, probably, even talk.

"Anyway, we've got there," he said. "There's no turning back, and we'll have to look around to see where to go next." If someone is here, we could be noticed by the smoke from the fire or maybe by conversations. He paused his words, swallowed the lump that rose to his throat, blinked several times quickly, dispersing the remnants of fatigue, moved his head from side to side, kneading his neck and checking his coordination at the same time. "And you need to find at least some food, although you know that yourself.

As soon as the last words left his lips, he stepped away from the fire, still testing his strength. The prince came close enough to the sea, but this time so as not to get his feet wet. A fresh wind blew in his face - after those raging blows, such a breeze was just a pleasure. He looked into the distance. Everywhere he could see was the smooth surface of the sea, gray but in perfect harmony with everything else, gray as the sky, quiet as the wind, and cold as the mind of the Prince. And like his heart. It seemed to be the same gray, extinguished long ago and forever. Like raw wood - bad, or rather, it does not burn at all. With a huge scar, which, while still a wound, before healing, allowed all the blood to flow out, and lose color. And the light is in his soul. Now he felt that he simply did not need the light of the sun now. Perhaps he would even become disgusting to him. Disgusting to the point of nausea, and therefore not needed.

Behind his back, the Prince heard some fuss, conversations, footsteps on the sand. His companions were preparing to set out, collecting what had survived the last night.

And what if all this is a nightmare? There was no battle. There is no Island. There were no these seven years. Maybe he just fell asleep there, next to her, without even finishing his story? Now he will wake up, break out of captivity and tell her everything that he has not yet had time to say, and she will definitely listen to him and...

No, all this is empty dreams.

Unable to control himself, the Prince still occasionally remembered that time - either in dreams, or on the road - everywhere. It was the only thing that could fill his heart with real blood even for a second - red and hot, maybe even a little burning. But not for long. For a few moments, until the killer's cold mind perched on these fragile ties with the past and destroyed them in an instant, without asking permission or even warning. Cursed Sands... His whole life was turned around in an instant, and he still can't recover. I don't even have time to stop and catch my breath properly. An endless race in the fight for his almost ruined life. But everything could have been completely different. And he will make every effort to make it so.

In the next second, he instantly returned to reality - the sound of the sword sliding along the sheath reverberated in him as if it were something at home, his eyes flashed and he turned around and walked away from the sea.

"I think swords will be useful to everyone. So," he stretched out his hand quite insistently, "I'll take one too."

And here it is, this feeling – when emptiness goes away. It is filled with at least something. His hand gripped the tool tightly. It is not known how many lives they have taken separately, it is not known how many they will take together. This sword didn't give him the same feeling as his old ones, but in the end, this one was capable of something. A rather rough, rough handle, a blade, a little shorter than the old ones (he involuntarily compared them), quite sharp, but straight. And, of course, no character - an obedient tool, a toy that was truly in his power, blindly obeyed him, not even thinking about anything of his own. Now, struggling to control his temper, the Prince was even pleased with such a weapon - obedient and meek.

Sharing the burden with the rest of the squad, the Prince hurried to set off, calling everyone to follow him. The unknown awaited ahead, baring its black mouth.

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The sound of the surf, echoing from the walls, seemed to be the only sound in this godforsaken place. And sometimes a light, barely perceptible crunch of sand was heard under his feet.

The silence was broken again by the Prince, bringing at least some animation to the general confusion:

"We need to find fresh water. I think I can hear the sound of a stream or a small waterfall somewhere," he said in spite of his companions, "he was lying," but at least he clearly had some plan of action and broken the silence.

"I think I hear something too," Rahim replied. To his friends, he was always good-natured and simple, though at the same time understanding, no cruelty or desire to show strength. And now, apparently, he was playing along with the Prince, just to keep the conversation going, otherwise the silence would bring unimaginable despondency to everyone, drowning in the sound of the waves.

Then they walked in silence for quite a long time, but the stone had already been thrown into the water, and the water surface did not want to calm down - the despondency receded. Behind them was a string of footprints left on the wet sand.

"Over there, ahead, I think I see something!" Navid shouted.

And indeed, as they came closer, they could see better and better the huge gap in the wall. Apparently, this wound had lived with the wall for more than a dozen or even a hundred years - the stones were so overgrown with moss that sometimes they themselves were not visible. There were small fragments everywhere, which would not be enough for even a tenth of this hole.

The prince, carefully stepping over the sharp stones, went beyond the wall first. He felt a terrible chill emanating from the wall, although a second ago, standing next to this wall, he had not felt anything like this. Part of the crew watched him, not taking their eyes off. The rest whispered that their entire journey had already failed - no ship, no chance of victory. The Prince may be brave, but he obviously does not know what to do. And the most reasonable thing would be to leave this place altogether at the first opportunity.

The prince did not notice any of this. With a silent gesture, without even turning, he beckoned the others to him, and so energetically as if he wanted to show something. He did discover something interesting. Just beyond the wall was a wall of jungle, over which the top of the fortress could be seen in the distance: a huge castle, unlike any the Prince had seen before, frightening in some way, perhaps in its severity and monotonous gray color, reminiscent of death. It consisted of many interconnected square-shaped towers, framed by even, equally square teeth that stretched into the sky. However, a large part of the fortress was definitely hidden from view. And it was also difficult to distinguish any details from such a distance.

The prince easily climbed the wall along the edge of the breach, albeit very carefully, every stone threatening to slip out from under his feet. At the top, the wall turned out to be smooth and wide enough that two people could easily pass each other on it. And again he looked around the fortress, seeing its high sheer walls adjacent to the shore: it turned out that it stood on a separate island that was located inside the open ring, on the shore of which they had washed up. Beyond the jungle stretched a vast wasteland, and in the distance

rose hills and cliffs. Obviously, they will need to find a way to cross to the other side.

It was necessary to move on. The cold and inhospitable sea was behind us, and the unknown stretched ahead. Just as unfriendly and gloomy. From the wall itself began a narrow, barely noticeable path that led into a dense thicket.

By the time the Prince climbed down from the wall, several of his companions had already moved forward, into a thicket of randomly scattered trees of all stripes, tall grass, vines hanging from everywhere, and some other incomprehensible plants that twined around gnarled branches and fluttered under the light breeze that came from the sea. The swords that each of the members of the squad stocked up on turned out to be very useful - they were convenient for cutting a road. The grass was damp, large drops fell from the leaves of the trees every now and then, so everyone who walked now, constantly brandishing his sword, was soaked through, and the faces of the travelers were spattered with water and mud.

However, as they moved deeper, everyone in the squad noted to themselves that a suspicious silence reigned around, which was never broken by the distant crack of a branch or the lonely cry of a bird. Not even the occasional rustle. It seemed that the forest was empty. Or he hid, preparing some surprise for the travelers.

"What could you see from the wall?" How big is this fortress? Farang said to Prince.

The prince stopped, as if weighing every word, and then, sharply waving his sword and striking a branch, answered:

"It is huge and is located on another, inner island, and now we are kind of on the outer ring.

"An island within an island?" Farang asked, surprised.

"Yes," said the Prince, adding, "And we must find a way to get to the other side.

"Do you think this is the one...?" Farang persisted.

"Apparently, the same one. Soon everything will become clear," the Prince said vaguely, as if into emptiness. Although, of course, he was sure that this was the very place.

At that moment, Taufan, who was walking nearby, joined the conversation:

"Or maybe we didn't get to the island?" Maybe this is the outskirts of some unknown land?

"I doubt it," replied the Prince.

–Why? Toufan asked incredulously.

The question was awkward, and the Prince did not want to answer it. And he could not quickly come up with the necessary lie. And then, suddenly, a loud crack was heard ahead, which distracted everyone from the conversation. The travelers froze from surprise,

listening intently to the silence of the forest and looking around in fright.

A few more strange sounds were heard, why someone's footsteps. Then again a few moments of silence, followed by rapid footsteps, accompanied by the cracking of branches and the loud rustle of grass. All the members of the squad were in suspense and, with swords ready for battle, turned all their attention towards the mysterious sounds. The next moment, a breathless man flew out into a small clearing in front of the travelers.

"Arsalan!" You're alive! Rahim cried.

"They're nearby, there are too many of them for me alone!" He answered.

"Who are you talking about?" Rahim asked in surprise.

"Those monsters on the enemy ship – are you talking about them?" Are they somewhere nearby? The Prince interjected with a question.

–A what? No, these are some wild animals. I could handle one, maybe two. But there are at least three of them! Arsalan explained.

The prince noticed how Arsalan limped on his left leg. He walked over to a large log lying nearby and sat down. He was calm enough and didn't look frightened. The rest of the squad sat side by side, some sitting on the same log or a nearby log, others leaning their backs against a tree, or simply standing nearby.

"I woke up somewhere on the shore. There was no one nearby and I, gathering my strength, went inland. That was a few hours ago," Arsalan began to tell. "Then it seemed to me that someone was watching me. Mighty silhouettes flashed here and there. I tried to fight back one of them, but then the others arrived. I decided to leave the thicket as soon as possible, but in the end I met you.

"And how did you overcome the wall?" Farang interjected.

Not immediately realizing that he had been interrupted, Arsalan stopped, was silent for a few seconds, and just had time to open his mouth to continue his story, when somewhere to the side he heard quiet but massive footsteps and a dull growl, which no one except Arsalan had heard until then.

In the next instant, three terrible creatures that resembled huge wolves or dogs jumped out of the tall grass into the clearing, but instead of fur, they were covered with something like scales. In some places, it became keratinized and grew in layers, which caused unusual formations to appear on their backs, looking hard as bone, with sharp ends, moving when walking. Huge mouths, dotted with a double row of white fangs, from which a viscous saliva mixed with blood slowly dripped, inspired genuine horror and disgust at the same time. With each step they took, sharp black claws dug into the ground, around which grew sparse gray fur. The creatures had no

ears: instead, there were small growths with barely noticeable holes. There was no tail - the entire back was covered with a kind of gray shell. All this caught the eye instantly, like a huge shapeless spot; There was no need to look closely and highlight details - there was just an enemy nearby, who already seemed to be familiar to the smallest detail.

The dog in front had a bloodstain instead of one eye, which gave him even more anger and ferocity, which was felt in every movement of his massive paws.

As soon as they noticed the appearance of the unusual beasts, each grabbed his sword to at least try to fight back. Only Arsalan did not have a sword - apparently he lost it at sea or during his wanderings in the forest. But he was decisive and, feeling the support of the rest of the team, was ready for any fight, even with his bare hands. One of his palms was stained with blood, but it didn't seem to be his own.

In the next second, the beasts and people violently charged at each other. The first to jump were the two stone dogs that stood a little behind. One-Eye seemed to be waiting for something, sparing his strength for unnecessary movements, but this did not detract from the wild bestial fury oozing from his gaze. Dogs were larger and much stronger than humans. The first blow of a clawed paw cut five deep bloody furrows on the face of one of the travelers, each as wide as a finger, crossing the eyes. The wounded man – it was Mertash – howled wildly. His cry frightened more than the dogs themselves. He instantly convulsed and, clutching his face with both hands, fell to the ground. Having lost both eyes, he screamed terribly, choking on his own blood. He screamed at the same time from horror, pain and a kind of resentment for his fading life. Lying on his back and desperately feeling the ground with his hand, he felt death slowly but surely approaching him, rolling another clot of blood to his throat, digging into him with his long, cold fingers. And this feeling was more than real - the very first dog approached him, slowly, as if deliberately stretching the already protracted death agony. After a couple of seconds, he felt the creature come too close and put one paw on his foot. She instantly responded with terrible pain from the slowly but deeply digging claws, squeezing an even more terrible scream from the poor man's throat. It gave the dog even more strength, it irritated him.

The dog's next step pressed on his chest with a soft and gentle step, causing his ribs to break. The claws went somewhere into the soft fabric, digging straight into the heart. But they didn't seem to want to take their lives instantly. It was too easy. In every movement of the beast, there was a desire to slowly dig one claw into the heart, to run a sharp tip over it, ripping open the quivering flesh and

releasing a stream of blood. After that, all that remained was to abruptly pull it out along with the pieces of meat and lick the claw, tasting the human pain trapped in a bloody drop. The unfortunate man lost the last threads of life, spitting blood and hearing his bones crack. Having fully enjoyed the pain, the monster made the last movement that managed to catch the dying consciousness of the dying man - it sank its fangs into his neck and tore out a piece of flesh along with the Adam's apple and, casually shaking its head, threw it into the grass. This last action was a deliverance for the unfortunate man, he waited and desired death as some kind of supreme happiness. The handwriting of a real ruthless killer is to force his victim to run to death on his own through terrible tearing agony and desire deliverance. As soon as his jaws closed around the poor man's neck, he died, leaving this world behind only a disfigured body and blood-stained grass.

The cruel, soulless dog moved on, leaving the last mark on the unfortunate body, stepping on the face with its hind paw, tearing the skin already pitted with terrible bloody stripes, and cracking the skull of its victim, and then tearing the paw out of what had once been the face, sprinkling the ground with drops of blood flying from its massive paws.

Fighting for their lives, the members of the detachment tried not to yield in cruelty. Rahim grabbed a large knotty club that happened to be near his leg and struck the dog closest to him on the predatory face with all his strength. The blow turned out to be quite strong even for such a large and strong animal, whose head was much more vulnerable than, for example, the back or paws. A person could easily knock out the lower jaw and several upper teeth with such a blow. But the dog just shook its head to the right by inertia, spitting saliva and blood in the same direction, growled even more muffled and menacing, taking a few steps back. But the beast did not retreat. It was only a preparation for the throw. The animal, already overwhelmed with wild rage, held a grudge and wanted revenge. Crouching slightly and looking somehow from under his forehead, the animal seemed to be trying to hide its true intentions. And then a moment passed, and the grasping paws lifted off the ground, blasting it with sharp claws and throwing back clods of forest soil. However, Rahim was ready for this, and, throwing away the club, he was about to rip open the dog's stomach with his sword, which was no longer covered with scales, but with delicate skin with short hair - the most vulnerable place. This was an extremely dangerous undertaking - the claws of the beast could easily tear a warrior to shreds, as it had just happened to Mertash. So Rahim began to duck, trying to pull his head back. He could not throw such a carcass over himself on his own, so he counted on the strength of the jump and his own

dexterity. But then the most unexpected thing happened: in excitement, Rahim and the dog did not notice how the Prince ran up. At the very moment when the beast was about to jump, the Prince decided to kick him in the side with his foot in order to deprive him of his foothold. And then you have to act according to the circumstances. The prince was often used to planning nothing for more than a couple of seconds, his actions and movements were always quite spontaneous, but they never lost their grace and confidence, which made them truly deadly. A blow from his leg squeezed the dog's ribs at the very moment he jumped. Already in the air, the dog could not resist and flew to the side, rolled over his back, accidentally touching the leg of Navid, who was standing nearby, with his back to everything that was happening. With a loud cry, more from surprise than pain - the wound was shallow - and without even having time to think, he plunged his blade into the beast's stomach, and somehow especially carelessly, taking the blade to the side and tearing the dog's insides. Instead of the usual roar, he whimpered loudly and pitifully. This cry was filled with anger and pain at the same time, which gave it a kind of plaintive tinge. But still, the dog was not going to give up so quickly. Desperately swinging its dirty clawed paws, the beast tried to get up. Navid, who wanted to strike again, almost paid with his life - once the claws passed insanely close to his face. Frightened, he instantly staggered back. At the same time, the stone dog jumped on his paws. His wound, now facing the ground, began to bleed with triple force. Dark red, almost black blood, staining the wool, poured like a stream to the ground. Whatever the outcome of the battle, the animal was doomed and had no longer than an hour to live. And in his eyes, through his fierce anger, there was some understanding of this, and so he threw himself into battle again, as if he had decided to sell the last moments of his life at a high price. At that moment, Rahim, coming to his senses from what had happened, flew up to the beast from behind, and with incredible force hit it with a club in the thigh. Rahim was distinguished by remarkable strength, so with this blow he must have broken the dog's bone. And indeed, immediately after that, the beast almost collapsed, its left hind leg buckled and trembled. But somehow he managed to keep his balance, and the beast, with a pitiful yelp and trying not to move its paw, turned its head to its offender, looking Rahim straight in the eyes. Navid, who had managed to approach the dog from the front, did not see this look. At the moment when the beast made probably the last conscious movement in its life, turning its head, Navid drew an axe and without hesitation struck a cold, furious blow to the dog's face, which fell somewhere in the area of the forehead. The force of the blow was enough to cut the elongated muzzle with a deep bloody

furrow and crush the skull between the eyes, and so that the corner of the axe dug deep into the head. A decisive fatal blow that will finally take the animal's life in a couple of moments. The dog shrieked desperately and began to wriggle in agony like a snake, throwing out the last fragments of this very life along with a terrible howl. The dog's movements were more deadly than ever, but they were no longer controllable and no longer specifically aimed at causing pain, so Rahim, Naveed, and the Prince simply walked away from the dying dog.

The second stone dog turned out to be more lucky. Swinging his paws menacingly in all directions, he did not allow any of the five men around him to even touch him. In each of his movements, one could feel some special, as if doubled strength, which he absorbed from a dead brother. There was indeed some invisible and subtle connection between the animals, not like that between a group of people in danger, but quite different, incomprehensible to man, which seemed to turn them into parts of something whole and indestructible.

Several times the dog managed to knock their swords out of the hands of the attackers. And then the unexpected happened again. It all started with the fact that the same dog, who was slowly walking next to him and was in no hurry to rush into battle, suddenly broke off and rushed at Iman, who was standing with his back to him. Instinctively reacting to this throw, the Prince rushed even faster than the dog to the unsuspecting and absorbed in the battle with the second beast Iman, and knocked him to the ground. The dog's paws flew almost close to the Prince's head, but still did not touch it. He saved his friend's life from a stupid and even ridiculous death.

At the moment when the second dog continued to fight, the third beast, unable to stop in the air, swooped down on the second and accidentally dug its claws into his side. After such a collision, they rolled headlong on the ground, almost catching another member of the team. But in the end, the one-eyed dog flew away from the other, unsuccessfully jerking its paw and snatching a piece of meat from the side of the beast it had fell. Taking advantage of this good fortune, Naysir immediately rushed to the wounded dog and finished it off, thrusting his sword into the animal's neck, and with such force that, passing through the soft flesh, he half-entered the ground, thereby nailing the dog to the ground. And instead of a death scream, a stream of hot blood spurted up from the animal's throat, splattering the hands of its killer, after which life almost instantly left the once powerful body. The third dog had already jumped up on his paws by that time, but now he had his back turned to his dying brother. However, he seemed to feel this death and, imbued with the power

that burst from the already dead body, with triple ferocity, rushed at Arsalan, barking loudly and clanging his teeth as he did so.

He stood aside, as if waiting for the moment, and when he saw the beast heading towards him, he immediately rushed to meet him, with his bare hands, wanting to grab it. This battle was specifically for the two of them, one-on-one; all the others stopped and did not interfere. Showing incredible dexterity and dodging a couple of ferocious blows, he put both hands on the dog's head and jumped on his back with a sharp throw and stood on it with both feet, clinging to the growth near the neck with his hand so as not to fall. Not expecting such audacity, the beast rushed to the side, trying to throw off the impudent man. But it was not so easy, Arsalan clung to his opponent with a death grip. In this fight, he seemed to have turned into a beast himself.

In the next instant, Arsalan squeezed out his other eye with his finger on the bloody muzzle of the maddened dog. With a loud yelp, he began to rush from side to side even more sharply, not seeing anything around. The time had come to strike the decisive blow, but it was impossible to do it with his bare hands. Only in this now the difference between a man and a beast was felt: the former had to clutch a bladed weapon in his hand to feel the strength, while the beast's weapon was only his own body, and he was used to relying entirely on it.

"Hold your sword!" Rahim shouted, intervening in the fight, and threw his sword to Arsalan.

He turned to the call and stretched out his free hand to grasp the blade in the air. And he succeeded, but this moment, for which Arsalan seemed to leave the fight, was enough for the dog to throw the newly-minted owner of the sword from his back. With an unexpected jerk, Arsalan dropped his sword and it flew to the side, and he himself fell on his back a few steps away from the stone dog. The beast, throwing off the enemy, stopped for a second, loudly inhaling air with its large nostrils. Almost instantly catching the scent of the man, he rushed at him to finish him off.

Having lost his sword, Arsalan [*note: from the Persian name "Arsalan", meaning "lion"*] lost the remnants of human features. And now the two beasts clashed in the last fierce battle, which in a matter of seconds was to end in the death of one of them.

Huge claws blew up the sinewy chest, striving for the heart beating wildly inside, and the weaker beast rested its legs on the dog's stomach, trying to throw it away or at least push it away from itself. But this did not help. And then, gathering strength throughout his body, he poured it into his right hand, into the very tips of his fingers, literally turning them into stone, and dug them into the dog's throat, burying himself in the living tissue and releasing rivulets of

black blood on his cut chest. And at that moment, the dog reached his goal and struck a fatal blow to the heart. But with his neck ripped open, he only had a few seconds to live, after which he collapsed on top of his already dead opponent, pinning him to the ground. The two fierce beasts died in a second, finally ending their deadly fight that had begun hours ago.

This last short battle had incredibly amazed everyone. Even the Prince, accustomed to cruelty and all kinds of spectacles, was really surprised. He only said:

"It's a ruinous place. The bodies of our comrades will no longer defile this land. She has long been cursed.

After standing still for a while, the travelers wandered on, continuing to cut through the constantly interfering branches of trees with their swords. And silence was their only friend. Everyone understood that they could meet other dogs or some other outlandish monsters. But after what had happened, no one wanted to say anything and everyone was silent, immersed in their own gloomy thoughts.

Chapter 10. Crossing

The medallion was not quite what I had imagined it to be. Today, after much deliberation, I finally set out for the Abyss, in the dead of night. Once next to her, I repeated the usual ritual, except that I accidentally slipped, fell backwards and dropped the locket. But everything went as usual, I got up and went to meet my new knowledge. This time I wanted more. I needed answers. And, more importantly, the way to get them – here I was counting on the medallion.

I made attempt after attempt, closing my eyes and trying to completely dissolve my consciousness in the Sands; then he concentrated on the medallion itself, trying to direct the streams of the Sands into it, to saturate it with their power - but this hardly gave a result. The sands seemed to pass through the locket, causing it to glow only a little brighter at times. Then, with all my might gripping the locket in my hand, I tried to focus on my recent conversation with Nergal. I think I saw a part of my dream where my own reflection was, but now it looked a little different. Instead of my reflection, I saw Nergal, heard his words. And, afraid to miss a moment, I stepped straight into this airy, almost invisible mirror and for a second it seemed to me that I was there for real! Inside this vision, I felt dizzy, I staggered back, fell, and accidentally threw the locket in the opposite direction. And immediately he found himself near the balustrade built around the Abyss, lying on a cold stone. The medallion hung in the air as usual, swirling the whirlwinds and streams of the Sands of Destiny around it.

What was that? Have I seen the past? Have I been there? Did the key work? But, the main thing was what happened next! A second later, the vision, still barely visible in the air, melted away. I got to my feet and was surprised to find that the locket was in my hand. What was that? It is difficult for me to answer, but I felt that the medallion was as if directed back, it was striving to soak up the Sands again. However, I remained where I was and mentally called them to me. Then I even took a few steps back, and something happened! Sand whirlwinds swayed and flowed in my direction, leaving the space above the Abyss. The locket attracted them, he sought to merge with them. So I can control the streams of the Sands! Maybe I'll even be able to deal with what happened, turning the visions into reality.

Why was my vision so vivid? I literally relived this moment, every part of it burning in my mind as if everything was happening right now! But I was already overwhelmed by new questions. I quickly realized that this was only the past, and I had come here to

know the future. He had to find a way to read him in this thick golden mist.

Meanwhile, the Sands continued to lazily ooze out of the Abyss, as if cautiously, with disbelief. I looked at the locket – it was burning brighter and brighter, gaining strength again. And then I came up with an idea, perhaps the best I've ever had: if the Sands could penetrate things, and with the help of a locket and my mind I could control them, why don't I create something myself that would help me study them? And my eyes immediately fell on the ring that I had almost thrown into the Abyss a few days ago. It was decorated with a large red stone, slightly transparent in the light. The ring of the Rulers, it was passed from one to another and was a symbol of power. I decided that it would be symbolic to use it to read fates, because it itself carried the chronicle of past years, saw many eras, but did not succumb to the influence of time.

Holding out my palm with the back of my hand towards the Abyss, I placed the medallion on the inside and concentrated on the streams of Sand that were now involuntarily flowing through the ring. And each grain of sand left its mark, barely noticeable and insignificant, but in the end the stone was all covered with the smallest grooves. Each individual grain of Sand is one of the myriad destinies that make up the boundless eternity. And all together they are a single element, which, if not tamed, then at least I knew like no one else. She was very malleable and seemed to depend entirely on the imagination of the person she was interacting with. That is why it was so easy for me to embody my idea now – consciousness determined the essence of this element. She became what I wanted from her. Perhaps this is just an illusion, but, one way or another, I got what I wanted. The next step was to see what was now inscribed on the Ring. And I ascended over the Abyss again, but this time without letting go of the locket. There was no special ritual, there was only my will and the bottomless, powerful, but gentle element. And gripping the locket tighter, I tried to summon more Sand from the depths of the Abyss, which, passing through the Stone of Destiny, lit it up with a bright white-golden light that flooded the entire inner surface of the dome above me. But now it was not just light: the grooves in the stone gave countless reflections in the form of symbols - I could literally read them like a book. All the destinies of the world were there! This is the greatest book that cannot be surpassed – it already has everything. That which was and all that will ever be. All that remains is to learn how to navigate through its countless pages!

I left the Abyss not only with an excitement similar to my first encounter with the Sands, but also with another, new feeling: I was sure that now the Sands would not disappear just like that, that this was not a random vision or a game of my sick imagination. Now they

are part of my life and part of the life of this island. They exist, and it's not about any rituals or time of day. They are a part of this world, or rather, its reflection, pulled almost to one point. A mirror into which I could now look at any moment and build my reality to the one I saw in the reflection. This is my fate.

Perhaps for the first time in a long time, a real smile shone on my face.

Namtar's Diary, Entry 15

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A swampy wasteland lay behind them, and a new part of the Island opened up to the eyes of the travelers - or rather, the outer ring with the strait, on which the Prince and his crew were thrown by shipwreck. The fortress, which was now quite clearly visible, was indeed located on a separate piece of land. Through the veil of fog, the jagged towers could be seen, embodying the threat with their entire appearance.

High rocky hills and a gorge between them appeared ahead. A shallow river meandered along the bottom of the gorge - the Prince and the others hurried to fill their flasks and drink. The water was pleasantly refreshing, dispelling gloomy thoughts from the recent fight. Having replenished supplies, everyone moved on their way. It seemed to be evening already, and in these places the passage of time eluded man, and because of the invariably thick clouds in the sky, it always seemed that twilight was coming and night was approaching. By this point, everyone, including the Prince, had already given up on the idea of finding a way to cross to the central part of the island today. To where the fortress stood, which, in spite of everything, beckoned to itself. However, it really attracted only the Prince, because he had a very specific goal. The only one, inevitable and incredibly important for him, inextricably linked with his life. For the rest, it was just a mirage on the horizon. Everyone made their own plans, wished for wealth or romance of adventure. But now all their hopes were fading with the light of the sun, which no longer penetrated into the gorge, in which the evening mist was beginning to swirl. People walking along the gorge tried to stay closer and closer to each other - this fog seemed so all-consuming. Such that it seemed - take a step and you will disappear in it forever. It was as if he threatened to devour the Prince and his crew, to devour him like a wild animal. Rahim, wandering wearily with the others, wondered how many people like them were in these places. And did everyone fail?

"What happened to Haraz?" The Prince asked, catching up with Madid and Naysir. The two continued to stick together despite the disappearance of their master.

"We did not find it, although we walked all along the coast," Madid replied.

"Most likely, he died at sea," Naizir added.

The prince regretted the loss - Haraz was wise, kind to him, he helped him so much with the journey and helped him out many times before.

Everything around was not just seemed, but hostile. Some of the crew even began to think that the water in the stream was poisoned - they were sick and some literally gave way. Although the reason for this, rather, was fatigue after the fight in the jungle, as well as the general tension and events of the previous day.

"We need to find a place to spend the night," Rahim said.

Words of approval were heard immediately. This feeling was practical, shared. Only the Prince was ready to go further. He was as tired as the others, but something was pulling him forward. It seemed to him that time and his own life were slipping away from him, and he could only catch up with them by constantly moving forward. But, after a few steps, the Prince realized that he had nowhere to go and was forced to agree:

–Ok. I'll be on the first watch," the Prince volunteered. "Someone will replace me during the night."

The group found an island of vegetation nearby and decided to settle down for the night in this place - sleeping on the grass, even if wet with dew, would be much warmer and more pleasant than on bare stones. It was decided not to make a fire - it was too dangerous to give yourself away like that. Even before dark, everyone saw that caves and some passages were cut in the rocks in places, but no one dared to go to them, especially to spend the night. Perhaps they have yet to face their inhabitants – who could they be?

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The ghost sat opposite the Prince and looked at him with interest. He pondered, looking around from time to time. There was silence all around, the singing of birds could not be heard here, and even the murmur of the stream was lost in the thick night. The Prince's thoughts were occupied by the events that had taken place. He grieved for his fallen comrades, but somewhat detached. Going with him to this island, they chose their own fate. The Prince did the same, not wanting to give his life to the mercy of a ferocious monster. He was encouraged by the thought that he was still alive and could

move on. But he did not have a single thought that he had been closely watched for a long time.

There was an unbridgeable gulf between him and the people. Wide as the ocean. All the bridges were burned and there was no hope of changing anything. There was a time when he literally waved his arms in front of the Prince's face. He tried to penetrate his thoughts not as an observer, but as an accomplice. All in vain. Only then, in Azad, when the Prince released the Sands of Time, There was some kind of vague chance. The meeting with Essen is his great luck, a unique chance. People like him who are able to see or hear ghosts, who are open to communicating with them (maybe not in the most obvious way), are no more common than one in a million. And, trying to correct the Prince's failure and possessing the body of Essen [*note: from the Turkish name "Esen", meaning "wind, air*"], the Ghost suffered a new one. After that, all he had to do was watch. To look for the reasons why the Prince will eventually die at the hands of Dahaki. His entire journey will end in failure. But perhaps in this place, shrouded in the magic of the Sands, the Ghost will again be able to interact with the Prince? Maybe this time he will be able to prevent terrible events? Unknown. And the uncertainty frightened him - he never lost this characteristic human trait.

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The morning was not pleasant. Each of the squad members, including the Prince himself, felt very hungry. And fatigue practically did not recede. Farang, the last of the Marines, fell asleep at his post. This time, all the dangers had passed the squad, but it was still cursed and grumbled disapprovingly by the others.

After dividing the modest supplies of food among themselves, the members of the party had breakfast and set off again. The food had given them strength, but now all reserves were completely exhausted. Realizing their situation, the travelers decided that they needed to leave this lifeless, godforsaken place and still find a way to cross to the fortress. There they had a chance to find something to eat and, depending on the situation, build a new plan of action.

After another winding turn, the gorge, which was already beginning to seem endless, suddenly ended. Ahead of us were low hills and some dilapidated buildings. It seems that people have left these places a long time ago. The buildings were low and had a poor appearance. Flat areas were located on the hills in tiers - it seems that once it was fields for sowing. The settlement itself was huge, it climbed the hills and flowed over them. Ordinary peasants or workers lived here. All the nobility must have lived on the central island.

The river in this place became noticeably wider and deeper - it was unlikely that it could be forded. In one place, the travelers came across a bridge - or rather, what was left of it. Time and water ate the stone and it collapsed. No one has lived here for several hundred years. This place was dead. Only lush vegetation spread over the hills and swallowed everything.

Ahead of them were two towers, their feet going into the water. They looked different from the rest of the buildings. They had a triangular shape, strange protrusions, covered a large part of the sky and were visible from everywhere. As if it were important that the people around you never forget their presence. Or about those who lived inside these towers.

"Are you still sure that this is the same island?" Rahim asked the Prince. "This place seems abandoned. There is nothing here but wild animals.

–No. It's not that simple. This is exactly the place! The Prince answered. "Who are these people who attacked us at sea?" This place is protected and not by chance. They just don't seem to know yet that we managed to survive and we are here.

In addition to all that the Prince knew about the place, and the intuition that guided him, his confidence was reinforced by another familiar feeling. The cold literally crept under the skin, squeezing the heart and terrifying. Just like in those moments when he opened the Sands of Time in Azad. He didn't have a dagger now, and there were no Sands around. But the feelings were almost the same. And the Prince felt the invisible presence of the Sands of Time, as if the earth was breathing them in this place. It was definitely the same Island.

"What if they're just sea robbers?" Who confused our ship with a merchant ship and wanted easy money? Farang objected.

– Yes, exactly! Rahim joined the conversation again, noting to himself with surprise that Farang had given out a fairly sensible idea, for the first time in the entire trip. Although, perhaps, this is just a coincidence.

"But why here, near the island?" The Prince objected.

"Perhaps this place is their secret retreat. They found an abandoned island and settled here, away from people. After all, it is not all time for them to sail in the sea and rob ships? Farang continued to give out ideas. He clearly liked his own version, which was youthfully romantic.

"The boy is right. This explains a lot," Rahim reasoned.

"And we can still find the treasure!" Farang exclaimed enthusiastically. "Just imagine how much they could have plundered over the years!

"You...," the prince hesitated, not wanting to reveal everything he knew. "You don't understand what you're up against. These are

not sea robbers, not ordinary robbers! Have you seen their orange eyes? These are not people! No, this is a truly special place!

As he spoke, the Prince turned to face everyone and stopped. The group followed suit and stopped. Questioning glances stared at the Prince, and some of them had wide eyes in surprise.

"I think you know something about these places and their inhabitants?" And you clearly know more than we do," Rahim expressed his general thoughts. "Will you take the trouble to tell us?"

The prince felt as if he had fallen into a trap. He did not tell these people a lot, and now they began to understand it. They began to have some vague suspicions. They were not yet enough to distrust the Prince, but they felt justified in demanding more information from him when they were in the place they wanted. And this was expressed in uncertain assents from one or the other.

"Yes, we want to know!" Toufan said, usually silent.

The prince looked around the team surrounding him, was silent for half a minute, collecting his thoughts, and spoke, slowly, trying not to give away himself and his true purpose.

"This place is full of magic. Perhaps you don't see it, you don't feel it the way I do. I had enough time and reasons to study and remember its signs well. Perhaps all you feel is extreme cold. But this is not the usual morning coolness due to the nearby water. It just means that what I've been hunting for these long years is a few steps away. From us. The people who attacked us are not people at all. They are creatures of this magic, it nourishes them and gives them strength. If you don't believe me, just look them in the eye. I am sure we will meet them again. I don't think the powerful power that the inhabitants of the Island possess will be given to us easily, just like that.

The prince fell silent. The eyes of some of the crew members opened even wider. Everyone needed a few minutes to think about what they heard, believe in it and build a new picture of what was happening in their heads. And new questions.

"Well, what kind of power is it?" Toufan asked. There was some kind of challenge in his voice. He is not used to retreating in the face of the elements.

"You can use it to manipulate time," the Prince replied. "Although this is only a part of what the Sands of Time is capable of.

"How can you have it?" Farang asked with a glint in his eyes.

"I have come here to find out," said the Prince. He had to retreat, step by step; Each new question drove him more and more into a dead end.

As if sensing this, Rahim spoke in an uncharacteristic tone for him, interrupting another stupid question from Farang:

"You maybe. But why are we here? What makes you think we need such... Treasures?

"I know a man who has been here before. The island is rich not only in this. Its inhabitants have possessed valuable knowledge since ancient times, far beyond the control of the flow of time. This knowledge is the true wealth of these places," the Prince answered, already beginning to improvise. He wasn't lying, he was still just not telling the truth.

Taking advantage of the silence, the Prince continued:

"Many have tried to reach the Island. But his trace is so lost in the centuries that it turned out to be almost impossible. Any ruler would throw all his strength into the search, for the sake of the power that can be obtained here!

"Then why did you and your father send here not a whole army, but one miserable ship?" Toufan asked. "We didn't even manage to get to the Island normally, without losses!

"That was the idea of the trip. A small squad that will secretly infiltrate the Island and will be able to act stealthily and accurately. In the same way, a man who knows has been here," the Prince replied to him. He was lying now, though he knew that Naveed, Iman, and Haraz's bodyguards would support the idea of a small, secretive force.

Although, however, he did not say anything either. All the members of the crew now thought that they had a special mission - to steal the secrets of the Island, wield a mysterious power and transfer it to the ruler of Persia so that it would gain truly unprecedented power. The prince, for the moment, was quite satisfied with this, and he was in no hurry to disappoint them.

"We need to move on!" Farang said impatiently. It seemed that the Prince's words had taken hold of him.

Rahim, who had been silent all this time, listened to him attentively and pondered. And at the very moment when the conversation died down and the travelers began to move on, he spoke. His words were wise – it seems that he saw the very essence:

"Are you talking about time management, my Prince?" But look around, at all this desolation! There is nothing alive left here, everything has gone into oblivion. Aren't you afraid of the thought that the same fate may await Babylon? The greatest city will fall, these Sands of yours will devour it, as well as this island. Are you sure of your desires?

The prince stopped. His face showed incredible surprise. And determination of the same strength. Without turning, he put it into his words:

–You are right. I'm here to destroy the Sands of Time.

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The morning mist that hung over the water and enveloped the travelers looked different to the Ghost. He saw much more than people. White spots floated over the river in mourning silence, having a distant resemblance to the figures of people. They had been people once, of that he had no doubt. Souls as if torn out of the body.

With each step, the ghost saw the silent movement more and more clearly. And at the same time, he did not hear a sound. And he could not shout to these souls. He looked at them and plunged deeper and deeper into the atmosphere of what was happening. The fog disappeared, the waters of the river flowed backwards, the trees were pulled back into the ground. Time flowed backwards, houses and buildings were miraculously restored. It seemed that in the vision of the Ghost, life returned to these places. But this was only an illusion. As soon as he was distracted a little, time jumped back to the starting point. And in any of his moves, forward or reverse, fast or slow, he saw these abandoned souls.

The ghost remembered Asha. A young Indian warrior from Azad who, despite his young age and ardor, taught the Ghost a lot. He literally opened the way for him, allowed him to move at least somewhere. Asha's thoughts, though chaotic and largely inaccurate, were in the right direction. Faced with the unknown, he tried to understand it, to realize it, and even to master it. He was a pioneer. Now the Ghost regretted that he had not managed to save Ashe's life. Although, however, the Prince turned back time with the help of the Sands, and all the dead came to life again! But who knows what else he could learn from Asha? Perhaps he would even have been lucky enough to find this thin, unreachable path that connected people and ghosts. People like himself. And such as he saw now. There seemed to be almost no difference between them. But it was great. They were victims, they were not going to remain forever on the ruins of their settlements. He lingered in this world of his own free will. At first, the Ghost wanted to keep fighting. The fight was not over. Now he felt a new desire in himself, although he could not fully explain it to himself. He wanted to know his nature.

Those ghosts that were now floating over the river headed in one direction. But in their movements, in the fragments of their faces, there was no real aspiration. It was wandering, wandering. They are the eternal prisoners of these places. And the Ghost struggled to see through this eternity. See it in its entirety. But he only managed to plunge back into the abyss of time and see the settlement around him in his best years. In front of the stream of ghosts towered some kind of pyramid-shaped temple (in the time of the Prince and his team, there were only shapeless ruins on this

place, a pile of stone blocks and nothing more). They reached it and disappeared inside. And after a while, they all floated out in the same silent and majestic way, after which their path lay up the slope. Up there, they stopped for a while, as if peering into the distance or thinking about something, and then descended back down and went somewhere else. And so on endlessly.

In all the time that the Ghost had been watching them, he hadn't noticed a hint of any communication between them. Only a semblance of sadness, forever frozen on their shapeless faces. Exhausted, they were completely lost. Pulled out of the flow of time. The ghost, sensing his ability to see through time, wanted to develop it. In his head, the idea of knowing the world through the ability to be in one place at all times at once had matured in his head. Now it has finally grown and turned into an aspiration, into a goal.

Perhaps he has not sufficiently discarded all human prejudices and habits. He still didn't feel like a different kind of being. It was as if he was a man who closed his eyes and plunged too deeply into his fantasy. Falling asleep, he left his own body, but retained his true nature.

When the Ghost came to this thought in his thoughts, he wanted to slap his forehead. He suddenly realized a simple thought – he still associates himself with Asha! He tries to think like Asha, he sees like Asha and even strives, in general, for the same thing!

This thought depressed the Ghost, he felt that he had reached a dead end. What if, before he died, he accidentally managed to absorb something from the Sands that he was not even a ghost in full measure? Perhaps it is he himself - a lost soul who does not hear the sad song of real ghosts wandering around. He doesn't even look like them. Normally, Sands do not affect ghosts. These two elements do not touch, do not have power over each other. What was the power of the darkness that permeated his body, since it was able to affect even a ghost?

He walked over to the water surface and looked at his own reflection. He had long been accustomed to it. The ghost looked like a monster and a traveler who was covered with mud on the roads, whose hair was tousled by the wind. But he was so ugly that he hardly looked like a human. Rather, on a corpse withered by time, which could still move in some unknown way. A revived corpse, whose brown-gray and sometimes even black body consisted of an interweaving of some strange twigs and ropes that did not have a permanent shape. They curled in and around him, sticking out of his back and hanging from his head like hair. Most of all, his palms resembled humans, with outstretched dry fingers and long nails. A dirty, shapeless robe was thrown over his body. He didn't remember exactly how she ended up on him, but there was a feeling that she

had literally grown into him. However, he was not going to get rid of it - in it he seemed less ugly to himself.

There were times when he despaired. He ceased to believe in the power of his choice, his own will, and regarded everything that happened to him as a curse, as a kind of punishment. And this only added to his resemblance to a person. Who is he? This question tormented him endlessly. Ghosts do not know fatigue, do not sleep at night. Wandering would be their only lot, if not for the latent craving for the source of all life. The starting point to which everything returns. But he disobeyed the order established by eternity and went against everything. And how do his adventures differ from the aimless flight back and forth of other ghosts from this place?

Sinking into the abyss of gloomy thoughts, the Ghost suddenly threw his gaze at Jatta. And this suddenly made him feel better. He felt some warmth. Their strange bond, the friendship of a ghost and a dog (who was also a ghost), is what brought him back to life. Although it could hardly be called life. But at least the painful thoughts receded and he wanted to continue on his way. Do not stand aimlessly in one place, do not fall into the abyss. What if these ghosts around are just desperate? Who, because of the depth of their sorrow, have lost their minds, and after it all purpose?

Jatta couldn't talk. But she was there, heard him, reacted and seemed to understand. She helped him on his strange journey, was a part of him. He felt their fates intertwined in some mysterious way. Sometimes it seemed to him that she was leading him forward, to some mysterious goal. She repeatedly pushed him to some actions that he would not do himself. But this was not coercion, not subordination to the will. It was a call, an unspoken idea that would not have occurred to the Ghost. If not for her, he would hardly have saved Ajit from Dahaki's attack. Perhaps he would not have noticed Ashu either, who would have died much earlier, before reaching the Tower of Dawn. A long series of events closed in a ring. And it was enough for any link to fall out for the whole chain to crumble.

The ghost experienced a spiritual uplift. He realized that there was still hope (he had learned from Asha, too!), and decided to observe the Prince and his crew. They stopped, surrounded the Prince, and talked about something. The ghost knew perfectly well what it was. He knew how it all began and how it would end. If he wished, he could be transported to any moment of this conversation and see all the emotions and thoughts of people in their intermediate state. But he was not interested in the details. He tried to look deeper, tried to see something more general. And he involuntarily closed his eyes. If he was still at least a little human, now it was as if he had left his body twice. He broke free from the shackles of his doubts, trying not to see the world around him, but to feel it. He did

not feel the wind, did not know cold or heat. The world seemed different to him now. And not only with visual images - this is a trap that captivated his mind and did not allow him to see for a long time. Through him flowed the thoughts of people, which out of habit echoed the sounds and speech in his head. He could seem to get used to anyone, feel the direction in which his fate was leading.

Discouraged by his discovery, the Ghost broke away from his vision. He could read this world like an open book! He could turn the pages back and forth, reread the passages or entire chapters he liked over and over again, especially if he suddenly forgot something important. And at the same time, he felt part of something incomparably greater. I felt the breath of something great. In the intricacies of this strange stream, he saw not separate fragments, but phenomena and events as a whole. He felt the world in front of him melt away, he couldn't see anything, but he didn't feel lost. He is not a lost soul, he is the air shaken by the events of this world. Air, which is incapable of influencing anything, but is a huge creature that moves from people's speech, from their actions and even thoughts. Gradually, his sensations began to be supplemented by images, but now it was not ordinary sight, but a reflection of his feelings. He saw the Prince slipping into the hole he had dug for himself. It did not matter at what point he was - at the top, barely stumbling, or almost at the very bottom - all this was something unified, complete, complete. This was a little depressing for the Ghost, but it still allowed him to look at things in a different way. Anew. The feeling of novelty is what he lacked so much. He has become different, or at least has come close to it. I came closer to understanding myself and my essence. The stream of questions that had been popping into his mind every second had now tripled. But this time he had a timid chance to find at least some of the answers to them.

The silent ghosts that haunted the ruins of the ancient settlement now also saw them differently. They were similar to what he and Asha [*note: from the Indian name "Asha", meaning "hope"*] had seen in Azad. Everyone saw them in their own way, but their visions converged on one thing - these were the souls of people, forcibly torn from their bodies by the Sands what came her way. As it turned out, they were most affected by this element. The only difference between those ghosts and these was that no one had opened the Hourglass in these parts before the desolation of these places. But the magic that lived in the bowels of the Island, and then was pulled out, ruthlessly gnawed people for years, literally sucking all the juice out of them. It was not a quick and rough, but a painful and long death. Like a disease that you don't pay attention to at first, and then it turns out that it's too late to fight it.

Out of time and out of the world. They and he. So different and so similar. What is its purpose now? He was still chasing his old goal, but it was becoming more and more meaningless and seemed decidedly hopeless...

The ghost looked at the world around him again with his usual eyes. He was confident that he would be able to return to his new skill, it was not an accident, but his new reality. He suddenly found himself standing on the other side of the river. As if he had really been blown away by the wind. He looked from the other side at the Prince and his crew as they moved on, winding between the ruins, and did not move. Now he could just stand still, and the world would move around him. Of course, it did not become the center of the universe, but the ability to be at once at all times significantly reduced the need to move. It was only necessary to choose the right place, which was the center of the situation.

This time he had to follow the travelers - he knew that they would not return here. As he was leaving, he glanced back at the rocks. There, in the caves, people who once lived in these places built special traps for souls - their naïve ideas about the world made them believe that at least after death they would find peace. The dying were placed in stone recesses hollowed out in the rock and tightly closed with a large slab, smearing all the cracks with clay. They thought that this would protect them at least after death from the invisible plague. But the Sands, slowly killing these people, turned them into dummies while they were still alive. Of course, boulders could not be an obstacle for ghosts. And after death, nothing changed. They were not ghosts at all, but something like a reminder that they were once people. No way back. And there is no way forward. Only something like instinct pulled them to familiar places, forcing them to measure eternity by the number of circles. Did not the same thing happen to him? What if all this is not the first time all this has happened, only the circle that he repeats is incomparably larger?

It was too difficult for him to find an answer to such a question. In this case, everything did not depend on the choice of place at all. Not from a gaze or a deep immersion in the essence of what is happening. But he was used to such difficult questions and simply dismissed it, as many had done before. Now he was concentrating on the more ordinary things that he had learned to look at so unusually. See the situation. To consider the essence, the form itself. Ask a question. Get an answer. Is this not a wonderful gift desired by the sages of the world throughout human history?

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The prince and the crew approached the foot of one of the towers. They didn't see what the Ghost saw, none of them realized half of what was happening. In a way, they were blind, even the Prince. However, this is characteristic of people.

Their attention was drawn to a breach in the base of the tower, from which a glow seemed to be emanating. At this point, the pillar of the stronghold almost went into the water - there were literally only ten steps left to it - and the glow was partially reflected in the water.

The breach was quite wide and almost twice the height of a man. Perhaps it was once smaller, but the stones hanging above eventually collapsed, enlarging the passage and forming a pile of stones on the approach. Coming close, the travelers were able to clearly see that behind the gap there was a small hall, which was well lit by torches fixed on the walls. But something was wrong.

The hall itself seemed very strange, and if the towers were clearly for guarding and surveillance, it had a solemn appearance rather than a gloomy and threatening one. And the light that came from the fire... did not move at all! There were no shadows jumping on the walls, the flames froze in place, its tongues not moving. And at the same time, the hall seemed so fresh, new - time did not touch it, unlike the rest of the tower and the settlement around.

–What is this? Iman asked the Prince, looking at the breach with interest.

He hesitated, unable to tear himself away from the wonderful sight - the hall captivated his attention. It surprised and frightened him at the same time. Rahim stared at the Prince at this moment and barely noticeably shook his head from side to side.

"I don't know exactly," the Prince said at last, without turning his head. "But I'll find out." Wait for me here! The Prince said, and jumping onto a rock, he dived into the hole.

As soon as he crossed the line, the hall seemed to come to life in an instant - tongues of flame in torches ran merrily, shadows jumped on the walls. Grains of sand swarmed in the air. The prince turned back - the whole world was there, behind the wall - everything became exactly the opposite. He saw people as shapeless spots that did not move at all. Perhaps sometimes they became even less distinct, so that sometimes it was even difficult to understand whether they were there at all.

Where did he go? What is this place? The prince looked around in surprise and looked for something unusual. Although this hall itself was already extremely unusual. Apart from the fact that time flowed in him according to some other laws, he had no other entrance! And not even a single window! It turns out that until this breach in the wall was formed, it was impossible to get into it through any entrance at all? After all, there were simply none. Hall-mystery, hall-riddle. It

was a special, special place. It cannot be that all this was done accidentally or by mistake!

In some incredible way, time has spared this place. It didn't seem as lifeless as everything outside. There were no cracks in the walls, the stones that made them up were not gray, but golden-yellow. The same as in the days of construction. The prince did not feel the smell of dampness that emanated from the river. He didn't hear a single sound coming from outside - there was absolute silence in the hall. He was deliberately left as if he was waiting for someone's arrival, and was ready to meet the unknown guest in all his glory.

The prince was at a loss to guess - he could not even guess how and why this place appeared. Almost nothing around gave clues. There was not a single hint. A red carpet led to the center of the hall (it had a round shape). Where it ended, there was a small pedestal. The prince climbed it, expecting something to happen. The mystery will be revealed, or at least a crack will be opened, through which it will be possible to look at the clue with one eye. But in vain. Nothing happened.

After standing for a minute, the Prince suddenly decided that he was doing something wrong. It was unlikely that he was the long-awaited guest, and it was foolish to hope for something like this. This place could be hostile at all, turn out to be another trap. But, perhaps, this was also hardly true. And at that moment, one thought began to grow rapidly in him. Simple in its essence, it disappointed him, but on the other hand, it was useful. He suddenly realized that this place was not special at all. And then he will not find and achieve anything. Of course, it was extremely unusual, but the island he had arrived on was not an ordinary one. Here it could be the norm. After all, it is not for nothing that it is called the Island of Time? Most likely, the castle, which is located in its central part, is one big special place, the walls of which from the outside have collapsed and surrendered to time. But inside, behind these walls, lived the past. It was like warm air held by the walls of a dwelling. Like water poured into a vessel. That's the magic of this place!

This idea, which had initially disappointed the Prince, now encouraged him. It seemed to him that he was beginning to understand something. Finally, he got to the answers to the questions that had tormented him for years! Now he only needs to find a way to get into the fortress. The prince grinned and walked towards the exit. He was surprised at the apparent simplicity of the idea that the inhabitants of the Island had implemented - to hide behind the vaults, which from the outside seemed completely lifeless and abandoned.

***

The ghost saw things differently again. Or just more, his gaze allowed him to look through time. Wider and deeper. He had seen another expedition take place about twenty-five years ago. It was headed by the same Indian Maharaja, Farah's father. He marched with a large detachment, well prepared for battle. It numbered about two hundred people. A vizier walked beside Maharaja. It seemed that he was still healthy and full of strength - not at all the weak old man that the Prince had seen him to be when he had gone to India with his father. Zoroaster was also there, long before he turned into a desert wanderer, and then found himself at the court of the Persian king.

The Maharaja's eyes burned, he sought to conquer this place, to subdue it. All those legends that he heard suddenly became reality! Incredible power, valuable knowledge and countless treasures - all this moved him forward, towards the cherished goal.

The army of the Maharaja was well armed. Those who followed in the center carried large supplies of provisions and a couple of dozen multi-seater boats. The gap in the outer ring was too shallow for a large ship—Maharaja and his crews arrived in three of them—without running aground. Therefore, the only way to get into the fortress was to take with them the same boats on which they reached the shore.

The ghost was distracted from the Prince and the crew and continued to look at Maharaja's path. He had been watching him for a while, starting elsewhere. The ghost could only look into the history of the place in which he was.

He first saw the arrival of Maharaja when he was standing near the Prince, who was lying unconscious on the sandy shore. There, he only saw ships being attacked from the wall by archers with flaming arrows. And their attack was rudely suppressed by shots from the ship's guns. This is how holes were formed in the outer wall of the Island, one of which the Prince met on his way. After that, Maharaja and his small army reached the shore unhindered and headed for the interior of the Island.

But at the foot of the towers, events unfolded more rapidly and dangerously. A detachment of sand warriors arrived from the fortress, and quite a large one. The outcome of the battle, which was supposed to take place at the foot of one of the towers, was ambiguous. The bulk of the enemy army was made up of the same soldiers whom the Prince had met during the naval battle. They once received the nickname - the Faceless. In addition to them, the Overseers and Executioners had to fight against the Maharaja, breaking away from their usual duties. However, a few moments before the start of the battle, the ranks of the Maharaja's army parted, several soldiers came forward with cannons in their hands. A

few more people hurriedly rolled the bases for them from behind. The Maharaja was well prepared for his campaign. And he used the same technique as on the water - the brutal destruction of enemy forces.

Several cannonballs landed right in the middle of the sand soldiers' army, and one went straight into the base of the tower, forming a hole in it. The enemy's forces became scattered and noticeably decreased in number. Now the outcome of the battle was obvious, and only time was needed. The soldiers of the Maharaja surrounded the survivors in groups and did not leave them a single chance. As a result, the losses of the Indians were very small, while the enemy detachment was completely destroyed.

After the battle, Maharaja, along with Amar, Zoroaster and several other high-ranking people, explored the hall, the entrance to which was formed after a shell hit the wall. But like the Prince, they found nothing, although their surprise knew no bounds. Maharajah, leaving the hall, urged everyone to launch the boats as quickly as possible and cross to the other side:

"Hurry, brothers!" The enemy will fall and his power will pass into our hands!

The shore was not far away.

***

The prince stepped out of the breach and looked around at his crew. Not everyone was here - as Farang said, some had gone to explore the surroundings and look for ways to cross. Those who remained had clearly managed to get bored and sat on the stones scattered around.

"What was there?" Iman asked. It was the first time the prince had seen him so excited, although it did not look like fright.

"Proof that we are on the Island," the Prince replied mysteriously.

Iman was satisfied with this answer. But when the Prince stepped aside, he continued to peer into the thick haze in the breach. Iman did not dare to go inside, but he was definitely interested in something, even seemed to attract him to himself. The prince, finding that Iman was not following him, stopped and, without turning around, added:

"This place was preserved by chance. It was empty inside, but time flowed in a different way. I'm sure the same awaits us in the fortress. It only seems ruined and abandoned.

The last words of the Prince were looking into the distance, as if not to Iman, but to himself. Either in an attempt to convince himself, or to develop his thought and get even closer to solving the mystery. But in vain. His mind was blank, as was the hall itself. A dummy hall,

a simple accident. The only important thing is that he brought the Prince closer to understanding what was happening.

Another ten minutes passed, and the members of the squad began to return to the foot of the tower.

"I found a couple of boats on the coast. I think we can still cross them," said Naveed [*note: from the Persian name "Navid", meaning "good news*"], being one of the last to arrive.

–It's cool! Toufan exclaimed. His tone was cheerless but resolute. He guessed that they were unlikely to expect anything good on the other side. However, he had no choice, although his enthusiasm did not seem to be shared by everyone.

After a little advice, it was decided to wait until evening, when the fog and evening gloom would thicken over the water and their boats would be invisible. If they go there now, they can easily be discovered and the squad is completely defeated. The prince gave hope to the rest of the crew by saying something about the enemy's special power that could be turned against him - otherwise their mission was almost doomed to failure, because the Island's guards could outnumber them many times in number and strength. Therefore, their main ally was secrecy. By secretly infiltrating the Island and observing what was happening, they could better understand what they were facing.

Some of the crew members had a secret hope that the fortress had long been abandoned. It looked too nondescript - ruins and desolation everywhere. Perhaps the best years for these places are behind, everything has fallen into disrepair and there is practically no one to protect the Island.

***

In anticipation of nightfall, each of the crew passed the time as best they could. Most of the people scattered in small groups along the coast and talked about something. Navid and Rahim were dozing near the tower, having found a couple of large enough stones for this. Farang burned with impatience and sometimes pestered the Prince with all sorts of stupid ideas and questions. Expectation gave rise to fear in our hearts and reluctance to approach danger. It also angered the prince, making him feel powerless and doubt the success of the entire mission.

He wandered aimlessly at the foot of the tower, trying to ignore Farang. He used some excuses, and sometimes only gestures. It was important for him to be alone with his thoughts, which, at the same time, tried to eat him alive. The feeling of helplessness and anger literally devoured him from the inside. Doubts grew stronger in him

with every step, no matter how hard he drove them away. What if he fails? All in vain? All these years he only postponed the inevitable?

His own mind seemed to be against him. Another moment and he would speak to him from the inside in a strange and alien voice, finally depriving him of faith in himself. Every second new thoughts were born about the pointlessness of his attempts, searches and efforts. The reasons and explanations for his future failures were invented by themselves. Or rather, the only and most important failure. It is not known what exactly it will be. Maybe Dahaka would catch up with him even here on the Island. Maybe he won't be able to withstand the hordes of enemies. Or he will be swallowed up by the Sands, this time for good. Anything! But the result is the same - death.

The prince decided that in a couple of minutes, he would definitely go crazy. He needs to be distracted somehow. There was almost no one to talk to now—Rahim and Navid were asleep, and Farang was clearly not suitable for the role of a pleasant conversationalist. The rest had either wandered far away from here, or were little known to the Prince. Perhaps he did not know his team well at all. Why are all these people here? Isn't this another manifestation of cowardice? Would he not have the courage to face the enemy alone? Or is it just a shipwreck and the fact that they have nowhere to go and have to go side by side with him, whether they want to or not?

Meanwhile, Farang gave up his attempts to talk to the Prince and went to join the other members of the crew. He was not so stupid as not to understand that the Prince was not welcome with his company. And, perhaps, his pride played out, forcing him to leave.

Wandering aimlessly along the river, the Prince stopped at some point and looked at the water. He suddenly noticed that the river in this place was wide, but very shallow and could be forded, knee-deep in water. He suddenly decided to go to the second tower, which seemed even more ruined than the first. Perhaps he will find another such hall there - this will confirm his past guesses. And, in any case, he will be distracted by exploring a new place.

The prince took off his boots, rolled up his pants, and stepped into the water. It was cold, and it could hardly be called pleasant. But the Prince found something in the way the cold bit his legs. He endured and moved on, it gave him strength and confidence. He didn't mind, but at least he was going to give up. He did not want to turn into one of the same ruins as these towers.

Immersed in his thoughts, he suddenly touched something at the bottom of the river. It was not a stone or a log. Something different. Not yet completely torn from his thoughts, the Prince looked somewhat indifferently at his feet and saw something very similar to

a sword. The water column hid the object from him, but its shape bore a clear resemblance to it. However, this was not at all unusual. The prince was surprised to find that the lower he bent towards the water, the more clearly he could see this sword glow with a bluish-blue light. He involuntarily remembered the dagger he had found in the treasury of Maharaja. And, full of hope for such a find, the Prince bent down and took the mysterious sword out of the river. And then the most unusual thing happened – as soon as the object was out of the water, it stopped glowing. In the Prince's hands was a rusty piece of iron, which had only once been a weapon.

He could not believe his eyes. He had just seen the blade look new and emit a mysterious glow. But as soon as it was taken out of the water, the sword turned out to be useless and long corroded by water. Turning it in his hands and making sure that he had not dreamed anything, he threw the sword back into the water in disappointment and sighed heavily. Either time has mercilessly devoured everything here, or everything around is some kind of cunning deception that is very difficult to recognize. Did that empty hall prove anything with a special course of time? Perhaps the only thing that could help him with this answer was the presence of a similar secret hall in the second tower. And the Prince was about to move towards her, when suddenly the sword that he had thrown to the bottom began to emit a glow again.

The prince stopped for the second time and took his sword out of the water. But again he saw only a useless rusty piece of iron. This time, without hesitation, he dropped his sword again and watched. A few seconds passed, and the glow resumed. But no matter how many times the Prince took his sword out of the water, the same result was always waiting for him.

Throwing down his sword once again, the Prince decided to abandon his senseless attempts and finish crossing the river. He felt that his feet were already pretty cold. Again, he felt angry, as if the place was joking with him, mocking him. Everywhere there are strange deceptions, secrets that fascinate, but lead to nothing. And it is surrounded on all sides by destruction. She literally shouts in his face. No matter how much the Prince ran from fate, secretly hoping to deceive it, he apparently met the same fate as this sword. He will drown in the flow of time, die and go into oblivion. Except that it is not in danger of rusting.

When he reached the foot of the second tower, he found that there was no entrance, but a few stones had crumbled out of the wall and he could look inside. He saw a poorly lit room, without any hint of a special passage of time, excellent preservation, or anything of the sort. The stone tarnished and crumbled.

The hall was empty, but the Prince saw that the water had washed away the base on one side, and over time, everything that might have been inside had been washed out and sunk deep in the sand. The only reason this sword was here could be because someone had dropped it. Someone who followed the same path as the Prince.

Well, at least now he understood where this blade came from. And he attributed its strange properties to the fact that nothing in these places is what it seems, especially after some time. Even the water here was somehow unusual. Perhaps if the Prince had put his head under the water, he would have seen that there was no glow at all. And this would once again prove that this is only a deception. Just an illusion. And it's good if it's only visual. The prince would not even be surprised if it turned out that there was no sword at all.

This time he was no longer interested in why there was not a single entrance in this hall. He wandered dejectedly back down the cold river. When he reached the shore, the Prince hurried to roll out his trousers and put on his boots. This helped him warm up a little. The Prince spent the rest of the evening in vague but not too burdensome thoughts.

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By the end of the day, the wait became like, if not torture, then a test. Hunger, uncertainty and danger - all this put a lot of pressure on the crew members and the Prince. At some point, Naizir could not stand it anymore and spoke out:

"How long, damn it, are we going to stay here?" What are we waiting for? The fog is thick, we would not lose each other in it!

It turned out that he voiced general thoughts out loud. And everyone agreed that it was time to sail. It was not necessary to wait for complete darkness. Idleness drove people crazy, and they themselves were glad to voluntarily go into danger.

The prince and the crew shared the modest food supplies they had managed to find nearby and headed for the boats that Navid had discovered. They, like everything here, had been influenced by time, but they didn't look so old and decrepit. Someone left them here not so long ago.

The prince could not break away from his thoughts. He didn't want to talk to anyone, so he chose a small two-seater boat. He was going to sail alone. Perhaps he should have thought about it in the first place.

Rahim and Navid, on the contrary, were talking animatedly - their rest helped them. The rest of the team somehow involuntarily reached for them. And even Naizir was already limp and did not swear, as he had a few minutes ago.

There were two boats, the second - the crew was heading to it, it was multi-seated and somewhat better preserved. People crammed into it, but suddenly it turned out that there was not enough room for Farang. He had to sail with the Prince. As the young man approached the shallow boat, the Prince sighed heavily. However, it wasn't even about Farange, but about the fact that he couldn't be alone.

The boats pushed off the shore almost simultaneously, the first splashes of oars were heard, and a thick fog almost instantly enveloped both vessels.

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There was silence all around, broken only by the creaking of wood and splashes of water. Farang was the first to feel the excitement. He did not hear the second boat - no conversations of people, no splashing of oars - nothing. The sky was rapidly darkening and becoming cold.

Soon the excitement passed on to the Prince. He did not feel fear, but it seemed to him that he had lost his bearings in space and they were swimming in the wrong direction. He stopped rowing and motioned for Farang not to make a sound. However, he was as quiet as ever. It seemed that he was really frightened.

Both had the impression that they were in some other world. In the realm of emptiness, as if blinded and deaf.

"Maybe we should call them?" Farang finally broke the silence.

–I don't know... No. Do not. They can hear us, what if we are already close to the fortress? The Prince answered. Although he also had a desire to shout at his comrades, and he fought with it.

And Farang struggled more and more desperately with his fear. Everything blurred before his eyes, he began to shake from the cold. It seemed to him that even time had stopped in this place. And their boat isn't really moving anywhere. The whole world froze and only the fog continued to swirl. He was fraught with some kind of threat. But he was even more frightened by the possibility of staying in this place forever. Forever lost in the void, mired in nothingness. Farang could not swim, otherwise he would have jumped off the boat in a panic long ago and would have tried to save himself in this way.

His excitement was somehow transmitted to the Prince. Instead of calming the young man, he renounced reality, as if falling into an abyss. He began to think that he was surrounded by enemies who were about to jump out of the fog and pounce on him. He was not afraid of the fight, he was only worried about this monstrous unknown. Perhaps there is some kind of power behind all this, which he will never be able to defeat. Like a wild beast, it would simply swallow it with its huge black mouth. Or vice versa, nothing will

happen, and they will remain absorbed in this place. They will be lost here forever, as if in a labyrinth with no exit.

And they both saw no way to escape from this captivity, except to hope that in a few more minutes the fog would dissipate and the shore would appear at the foot of the fortress.

The Prince had another thought - they could surely come back. The fog will part, and they will return to the shore from which they sailed. This place should be arranged in this way. But the Prince didn't want that. Therefore, he did not share his thoughts with Farang. Instead, he said:

"We need to think about how to get out of this captivity.

"Hmm," Farang hummed indistinctly. It seemed that now feelings and emotions had got the better of them and he was not able to reason soberly.

The prince would have to act on his own - now he finally understood this. His companion sat with a pale face, a trembling chin, and for some reason held on tightly to his sword.

And then the Prince suddenly had a crazy idea. Mad – just right to be true! Not only should they not go back, they should do everything so that they simply cannot return! He must show his fearlessness in the face of death, his readiness to give up everything for the sake of his goal - only then the Island will let him near it. For a moment, he even thought he saw the face of his death. And he looked at it fearlessly, but in a moment it melted into the mist. There is no turning back!

The prince stood up and, swinging, threw the oars in turn in different directions, as far as he could. Farang was so startled by this that he recovered a little and spoke.

–A what... What are you doing?

His voice was clearly hostile. It suddenly occurred to him that the Prince was a mirage, merely a form by which this place pressed against him. The prince realized that the time had come to act decisively.

"Give me your sword!" He barked at Farang. He was taken aback and stared at the Prince in silence for a few seconds before he said:

"Why?"

"Give me your sword!" Right away! The Prince almost roared.

The Prince's tone briefly took hold of the young man, and he reached for his sword. Without waiting for him to finish or change his mind, the Prince snatched the sword from his hands and threw it into the water. A few more seconds of delay and Farang would have realized what was happening and would have attacked the Prince, believing him a traitor or even an outsider. Now he went limp and sat back on the crossbar.

The prince was not going to stop. He drew his sword from behind him and punched a hole in the bottom of the boat with a few rough blows. The ship began to slowly fill with water, and the Prince hurried to throw his weapon into the water. There was nothing but horror on Farang's face - now he was also afraid of the Prince. But he did not hesitate. His mind was clear, he was full of determination. Only by cutting off the retreat could he advance. Most likely, someone before him did the same. The one who was able to get to the fortress before. Could it be that he was the one who threw that sword away? And will it happen that they will meet in the labyrinths of time?

The prince had long realized that Maharaja had traveled the same path many years ago, when he eventually managed to kidnap from the Isle of the Sands of Time with a dagger. Apparently, the rusty sword he found in the water near the towers was a sacrifice similar to his own. It means that he did everything right and...

The boat, despite the fountain of water gushing from the bottom, floated for some time by inertia, and then hit the shore. The fog dissipated in an instant. In front of them was the sheer wall of the fortress, but it was too dark to get a good look.

It is as if they crossed the border of one world, and ended up in another. Where everything was different. At least, he must not have come all this way to find nothing! The point of no return has been passed, there is no way back now. At least, that's what the Prince thought. Although he did not know exactly which of the actions he took helped.

"Get out." We did it! The Prince said encouragingly to his companion. "Now let's find the others."

Farang answered inarticulately and swayed out of the boat. The sight of the shore calmed him, but he hardly understood what had happened. They were on the other side, as if they had voluntarily fallen into some kind of pit - this was how he built his thoughts.

"Let's try to find the others," the Prince continued to bring Farang to his senses, repeating his last words.

The latter, shifting from foot to foot from the cold, finally said:

"What happened?"

"Sometimes, you have to risk everything to save your life," the Prince replied. "And that's why I'm here."

Suddenly, all the other members of the team appeared from somewhere to the side. They managed to get here before the Prince. And most importantly, they heard all his last words. Clear and distinct.

"We've been waiting for you for about an hour. Where did you go? Naizir burst out right away.

"We—" Farang began.

–Quite. We don't need to swear," Rahim interrupted the conversation. "Where should we go next?" He said to the Prince.

"Inside," he said dryly.

He waited for more uncomfortable questions, and he could literally feel the tension hanging in the air. But everyone just walked silently beside him, and no one even said a word. After a while, the Prince even relaxed a little - he was again interested in the secrets of the Island. Those that can help him. He remembered his idea that the past was still alive behind these walls, and that as soon as he stepped inside, he would be transported to the right time. Just like he had already done when he walked through the breach at the base of one of the towers. In this way, he can get even closer to his goal, not only in space, but also in time. The sands were born in this place, but not in this era.

Meanwhile, everything around was completely swallowed up by the darkness of the night. And because of the thick fog, even the moon and stars were not visible - they had to walk almost blindly, by touch, along the high, ancient wall that still reliably guarded the fortress from foreign invaders. During the time that they walked, the Prince and the crew rounded several rocks that protruded from the fortress wall. And there is no way to get inside. Whoever built this castle took very good care of safety, for many hundreds of years to come. A couple of times they accidentally stumbled upon stone doors, but they were closed and would not give way.

After about half an hour, they found a small cave in one of the rocks. It was located a little above the level of the surf, which beat against the coastal stones. Navid was the first to see it, after which he jumped onto the stone that preceded the entrance.

"Hey, all come here!" He shouted, trying to shout over the sound of the waves.

Rahim was the first to understand why Naveed was calling them and said to the Prince:

"I think we need to spend the night in that cave. We are exhausted and literally blind. We will move out early in the morning, as soon as the sky begins to lighten. Fog will allow us to remain invisible.

"Only if we are no longer being watched," the Prince replied and turned towards Navid.

He felt that fatigue was knocking him off his feet, and in spite of the fear of death that constantly haunted him, he simply needed rest. Rahim volunteered to be the first to stand guard - he managed to rest on the other side. Naysir and Madid were to be next. And the permanent sentinel was the Ghost, who still accompanied the crew. He was invisibly next to them and silently watched. The Phantom wondered what was driving the Prince. And what prompted his team

to follow him, going almost to certain death? It didn't seem that they were delighted with this place and with the events that had already happened. Maybe it's just that there is no other choice?

In the dream, the Prince could not shake the feeling that someone was standing right above him. And his imagination turned this vague image into the horror he encountered in the wilderness, on the day of Darius' death. At some point, he woke up and jumped to his feet. Breathing heavily and abruptly, he looked around, but saw no danger. Night still hung over the Island. He peered into the darkness and saw Rahim's back, which meant that it wasn't much time yet. In the noise of the wind and waves, for some reason, he heard either a dog barking or someone screaming. The first thought that came to him after that was that he needed a weapon. This is the first thing he will take care of in the morning, but now, perhaps, it is worth sleeping more. Maybe the vision would not come to him again and interrupt his sleep. The prince turned around and did not notice that several more figures soon appeared from the darkness.

"We've found the ship!" Someone whispered, barely restraining himself.

"Excellent," said the other shadow. "I hope the fog will help us."

The ghost continued to think. People were interesting to him – how far could they go when something was pulling them forward to a cherished goal, whether it was a desire to escape death or a simple but burning, irrepressible curiosity? To swim to the end of the world, to risk everything, is the simplest, the least they are capable of. To do the impossible is not even the most difficult thing compared to the desire to achieve the goal. And does the person get lost in this process? What if the long-awaited goal is suddenly achieved? Without much warning or ceremony. In one moment, which divides life into "before" and "after". Will a person find himself in this "after"? What will happen to him if he no longer has a goal?

Chapter 11. Paths diverge

I thought carefully about what had happened last night and realized that Fate was absolute. For a second, it seemed to me that I could go straight to the past, but the real meaning of what I had experienced was that it was impossible. ***And I certainly couldn't get the locket to do it.***

In addition, I gained some special calmness and confidence. My sleep last night, on my way back, was unusually sound, for the first time in a long time. I was also calm because there are some things I just can't change. But I can know them and be sure of them. It all started with the medallion – I don't know how it came to be or who created it, but I couldn't influence it anymore. I can only use it to create something new, to immerse myself in the deepest mysteries of the universe. No wonder I failed at first – it's just designed for other purposes. I may not know everything about it yet, but for now, I'll prefer to focus on my own discoveries.

First of all, this diary will now be something more. Now it will become a chronicle of my discoveries. My mistakes and successes. There is no longer any point in talking about the meaning of life and death, there is no time to grieve over the insidiousness of Fate – I am entering the path of knowledge. I have succeeded in transforming formless visions into a clear picture that I can read freely, like an open book. And this is just one of the uses of the Sands that I have managed to come up with at the moment. I simply created a thing, or rather, endowed it with power, which is able to draw the line of Destiny so clearly. I find it difficult to describe these symbols and signs, but when I saw them, I felt that I could easily understand them. I can look through one layer of them and see others. Infinitely, I was shackled only by the time allotted to me. Even now, I can see them clearly in front of me when I close my eyes. If I look at them long enough, I see faces, I see whole events, the whole Island – everything! In the most general form or in the smallest details - as I want.

Secondly, in the few hours that I spent there, I saw a lot of what was to happen. It was not always clear exactly how this would happen, but all the images are very clear. The ancient castle, which was almost swallowed up by earth and forest, will rise again, and its walls will rise above the Wasteland, and the Island will be transformed beyond recognition. I still remember every detail! The locket seems to help me remember everything in great detail; every time I concentrate on my memory, it seems distant and hazy at first, but then it begins to reach out to me like the Sands to a locket. As if these are not my own memories, but what I see in the Sands. I'm literally transported back to that time, everything seems so real! And

at the same time, I am aware that I am sitting at my desk and writing word by word in this journal. It is as if I am on the border of two realities and am able to peep into one of them with impunity, remaining in the other. Except that every time I feel a little dizzy, and it seems to me that I experience some moments several times – I have a deceptive feeling that I have already written these words three times. Apparently, the foresight of Fate gives this strange feeling when you do not understand for sure whether you have lived the moment for real or have just seen it in the timeline?

It is up to me to bring the vision to life. It's time to stop the endless withering of the Island. I managed to tame the greatest element, and, therefore, I can cope with this task. We are not guests on this island, we are born and die here, and we are destined from above to subdue nature and all the elements. The human mind must be at the head of everything. The knowledge that the Sands gives can bring him to a new level, to an unprecedented height. Animals and birds will bow their heads before us, and where there were ruins, the castle of the ancients will be restored. And not just restored, but built anew, better and stronger than the previous one! From the same ruins, I will build my new consciousness. Day by day, I will dissolve my mind in the Sands, and dig deeper and deeper. And it's not just about a close examination of your own and other people's destinies, but also about simpler questions: what to build a new fortress from? How to teach people this? How to defeat crop failure and diseases? And where to start?

One thing I am sure of is that we are on the threshold of a new time.

Namtar's Journal, Entry 16

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In the morning, it turned out that there were no free weapons left at all, and the Prince, like some other members of the crew, had to arm himself with improvised materials: clubs made of debris that they found on the shore, stones or metal rods. The Prince considered it unworthy to take away weapons from those who still had them, and besides, he did not doubt his abilities. Fighting the enemy was almost never a real problem for him. In any case, if it was a fight with a person or someone who can be killed.

Everything around was still covered with fog, but the sun was already approaching the horizon, so visibility was much better than at night. And closer to noon, the day generally promised to be clear, so they had to get inside as soon as possible, as unnoticed as possible. The prince, walking ahead of the others, suddenly noted to

himself that he did not hear the morning cry of birds familiar to the sea. The place was ruinous, as he had learned as they made their way through the jungle. And the Prince literally felt the closeness of the Sands in his skin - a feeling that he could not forget. I felt it so clearly, as if everything around me was saturated with them.

Rounding another rock, the Prince and the team suddenly found a gap in the wall and a staircase leading to the second level. Next to the gap there was a large lattice gate, which was lowered. Not failing to take advantage of such luck, the group turned into the opening and soon found themselves on the platform on top of the wall. Here the fog no longer helped them to hide, but there was no one around and it was quiet enough. Suspiciously quiet.

A small bridge led to the next level of the fortress - it seems to have been only its outer, protective wall - with an arch behind it. But the gate was raised, and nothing prevented him from going inside. The prince allowed himself a timid hope that no one knew about their presence and therefore such an oversight was made. Or, which is much more likely, it was all a trap - this thought quickly displaced the previous one from the Prince's mind. But in spite of everything, he took a few steps inside, but before he could turn and gesture for the team to follow him, he heard the clink of his sword against the stone and the heavy sound of the gate being lowered. He turned around anxiously.

Ghost looked directly at the Prince, standing on the other side of the lattice gate, along with the rest of the team. Rahim separated from the group, came closer to the Prince and said:

"I don't know what kind of madness pulls you inside, my Prince. But we've had enough – we've lost the ship, we've been attacked by these monsters, and that's it for what? All your promises are lies. I see through you, people like you – obsessed with a crazy idea. I don't know what exactly you are up to – to seek eternal life, to deceive your own fate or something else, but we are not on the same path further. If you are running to death like this, then go ahead! We will go back down and capture the enemy ship in the next bay. If we are not attacked, we will wait for you for two days and sail away from here. The ship will cruise behind the outer ring of the Island.

Judging by the intonation of his voice, he released all the discontent that had accumulated in him. Every time he tried to defuse the situation in the group, he was really only delaying the decisive moment. The one that had just come - and his hand and voice did not tremble. No one had ever seen Rahim like this.

At these words, the Ghost thought: "Yes, perhaps I would have done the same. I wish I could do it myself!" After that, like a breath of wind, he slipped through the gate and found himself on the same side as the Prince. Ghost had long watched the crew's discontent brew.

They whispered behind his back every now and then, wondering why they were really there. But the main plan of action was ripening in Rahim's head - he did not share it with anyone in detail. Therefore, even the Ghost did not know everything and, sometimes, something surprised him. It was only on the last night that Rahim persuaded several people, including Madid and Nayzir. Instead of guarding, they went to look around - somewhere the ship that attacked them at sea was supposed to be found. The others were aware of what was happening, except for Farang and Iman, but they did not take an obvious part. Their consent and approval were enough. The prince was thinking of something completely different, and paid little attention to minor innuendos and oddities.

Meanwhile, Rahim put his sword in his belt, and the Prince still could not utter a word. He was seized with indignation, resentment, and at the same time realizing that Rahim was doing the right thing. One sword blow and they are separated - their fates diverge, he remains alone. Alone with his death, which stared at him from every corner. The corridor ahead seemed like a huge all-devouring maw that slammed shut behind him.

"Well," the Prince said at last. "How long have you understood everything?"

"There were doubts, but when you and Farang got out of the boat and we heard your words, all questions disappeared," Rahim answered, regaining his composure.

"Now I understand why your father did not want you to leave Babylon," added Naveed. "He wanted to warn you against such a reckless idea!

"You understand a lot!" The Prince suddenly got angry. "This is my last chance!"

"Then use it wisely," Rahim replied.

After that, he turned around and walked away. The whole team followed his example. Suddenly he stopped, turned and added:

"And come back if you can. Two days.

Someone from the crew grumbled in displeasure, but Rahim [*note: from the Persian name "Rahim", meaning "merciful"*] did not pay attention. He sympathized with the Prince in his own way, but there was nothing he could do to help him except that. Now the lives of the remnants of the team were more important to him. And even more he was preoccupied with thoughts about what they would do when they returned to Babylon. Was it possible for them to return at all? What if they were imprisoned or executed? There were plenty of reasons for this. The prince was brought into darkness for the rest of their lives.

"There's someone there. On a ship! Farang said in a low voice. During Rahim's conversation with the Prince, he was standing a little

further away, and Toufan was explaining to him what was happening, pointing his finger at the ship, which could already be seen from this height.

"Let's get closer and take them by surprise!" They don't seem to know we're here," Madid said.

There were cheers, and the whole crew hurried downstairs. Everyone forgot about the Prince at once; Getting rid of him and his crazy ideas was a relief for everyone. And he, without thinking twice, turned around and walked in the opposite direction. Iman was the only one who turned after the Prince and followed him with his eyes, after which he rushed to catch up with the others.

The ghost reached for the lattice and followed Iman.

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The first thing the Prince thought about was how quiet it had become. He was suddenly left completely alone, but he felt some relief. The oppressive atmosphere of discontent and distrust disappeared. However, soon, calmness was replaced by a feeling of anxiety. And not even because he was left alone with this obviously hostile place, but because the unknown lay ahead. The prince did not know what exactly he would have to do or find among these ruins. He found nothing useful around him - from time to time he came across rotten racks with weapons that had eaten rust. The anxiety was fueled by the fact that the Prince did not have normal swords, and the enemy was already prowling somewhere nearby. It seemed to him that someone was watching him. As he advanced, he looked around cautiously, but saw nothing suspicious. There was silence all around, and the Prince could only hear the dull beats of his heart.

In fact, he still hadn't gotten inside the castle, he had only walked along the corridor of one of the outer walls that were built directly on the rocks. Rough stone steps went up and were lost in the ridge. Climbing up the hill and climbing the ledge in one place, the steps here collapsed, the Prince passed a row of columns, most of which had been knocked down by time. Like rust, it corroded everything around for many centuries, turning it into gray decrepit ruins, which smelled of dampness.

The rocks hung heavily over the Prince, and their gray stones at the foot protruded in all directions. Piles of stone blocks were lying here and there, falling out of the walls and collapsing them. The doors rotted and fell off their hinges. The outlines of the watchtowers were barely discernible in the bizarre-shaped cliffs. Trees broke through everywhere, sometimes as decrepit in appearance as the castle itself. Everything was overgrown with grass and shrubs. Nature has taken its toll. It seemed that people had left these places

long ago. But the impression was deceptive. There was one detail, strange and even frightening: torches or special burners were lit everywhere, arranged in rectangular marble pillars about a meter high. This place was not dead, there was still someone here. And, most likely, soon, very soon, the Prince will have to face the enemy. He had little idea how all this was possible, but he already knew perfectly well that this place was full of mysteries and secrets.

In the meantime, he walked in complete silence. In the distance, the surf roared, but very softly and almost inaudible. Occasionally, the Prince did hear the abrupt cries of birds, but he knew that even this did not bode well. He had already met sandbirds once, and he would not want to do it again. The gray stones around it were cold and hostile, but it should be noted that even through centuries and destruction, the castle retained its majesty. Elongated arches with narrow windows, crenellated towers and high walls were gracefully inscribed in a rocky ridge. Perhaps part of the castle was even carved out of the rock entirely. And, perhaps, this is not just a castle, but a fortress. Once completely impregnable and formidable.

As he was climbing through the next tier of defensive walls, the Prince suddenly saw someone staring at him through the narrow window above him. It was a man! The prince couldn't get a good look at him or her, but those eyes didn't glow orange or yellow. Realizing that he had been discovered, he hurried to hide. The prince stood for a second and continued to climb, winding back and forth along the outer wall. Sometimes it was very difficult to get through - huge holes were black in the floor and you had to climb the walls or walk along narrow ledges. Perhaps, the fortress was impregnable not only in the distant past, but, in a sense, remained so until now.

But, in general, now the Prince could get inside unhindered. The sentries had left their post a long time ago, and the trap that the lurking enemy had prepared for him would be much more insidious than an attack from around the corner. The prince was already aware that he was being lured inside, deep into the fortress - that was why no one had stopped him yet. But he had no choice, or rather, he had already made one when he went to the Island. He bent down and crawled through the breach under the miraculously preserved door that served as the entrance to one of the parts of the fortress. Sneaking inside, the Prince found that the corridor here went through a natural gorge. Niches were carved on the sides, in which huge stone statues stood. Almost none of them survived in their entirety, but they spoke of the former power of the Island.

At the point where the corridor exited the gorge, it spiraled and led the Prince somewhere up the rock. Everywhere the lit torches crackled ominously. The sun, contrary to expectations, hung behind gloomy clouds that covered the entire sky, making it difficult to

determine whether it was morning or evening now. A cold rain was drizzling, and the walls, overgrown with mold and moss, smelled of dampness. From the partially collapsed ceilings, some plants hung in arcs and here and there protruded crooked roots of somehow sprouted trees. The prince realized that he must have been mistaken —nowhere inside the fortress was time as still as there had been at the base of the tower, which they had discovered before the crossing. His guess was wrong - the same harsh and inhospitable reality was hiding behind the decrepit gray walls. This find depressed him - everything around him was unbearably monotonous, but at the same time completely unpredictable. And decidedly beyond his control.

Statues of warriors were replaced by figures of some outlandish animals, but it was difficult to see or determine anything in their outlines - time took its toll. In some places, it became dark and the only source of light was holes gaping in the ceiling. And nowhere was there even a hint of another time.

After another turn, the Prince came to what turned out to be the real entrance to the fortress. A wide and rather long staircase once led to it, but now it collapsed and the Prince, looking around, realized that he had to look for another way. Now he saw, literally felt, that the fortress was even more enormous. In the distance, from rock to rock (there was an abyss between them, so it turned out that one rock was turned outward, to the strait, and the second was inner, enclosed in a ring), passages were erected. Several cliffs towered separately from the rest of the ridge - there were also passages to them. The rocks themselves were high and there were observation towers on them. On the walls, here and there, there are still huge, torn and almost faded banners. It seems that they were once red and definitely carried some meaning or meaning.

All this time, the Prince did not leave the feeling that he was being closely watched. His anxiety grew with every step, and from time to time he heard suspicious rustles that had not been there before. At some point, he literally felt in his skin that danger was close and tightly gripped the club that he was carrying with him.

"Come on, show yourself!" I know you're there. In our area, it is customary to meet the enemy face to face! And if he is unarmed, then offer him..." the Prince said quietly.

After these words, he turned sharply and struck the enemy, ending the phrase almost with a shout:

–Sword!

His opponent was a black-haired girl with predatory eyes and dark, almost black armor. Her hair was short and slightly greasy, and there was a faint pattern on her face. As she fell, she let out a loud sigh – from surprise and pain. The prince heard her sneaking behind him and his blow threw her back. She sprang back to her feet, while

two human-like creatures rushed at the Prince, but instead of faces, only masks resembling animal skulls were visible. In the depths of their eye sockets, two bright orange lights burned. The Prince saw the same sand creatures during his encounter with the ship at sea, but not so close. But now, he stood firmly on his two legs and was ready for battle, even though he had a wooden club instead of a sword. Holding it above his head, the Prince held back the first blow aimed at his head. Without waiting for others to follow, he knocked down the enemy with a simultaneous push of two hands and a kick, and in such a way that he hit the second one - he also collapsed clumsily. The first, falling, dropped his sword from his hands and it flew up. The prince took the chance and quickly jumped for the sword, catching it in mid-air. The sword had a strange blade with a twisted shape, with a large bend at the end. Another moment and the Prince plunged it into the chest of the second fallen enemy, leaving a wide wound. At that moment, the thought flashed through his mind that his enemy, as before, might not be so simple, and ordinary weapons would not be enough to kill. But he had no choice, no time, and he resolutely struck the first monster that barely had time to get back on his feet. The blow was so strong that it cut off the enemy's head, and it flew to the side, rolling on the floor - the monster only had time to let out a piercing scream. And both bodies, with a difference of a couple of seconds, seemed to melt into thin air. Everything happened very quickly - first the skin of the monsters turned from gray to bronze, covered with cracks from which orange light oozed, then the whole body was covered with small spots, the size of grains of sand and, after a slight, barely noticeable flash, a golden-orange cloud dissolved in the air. This was somewhat reassuring to the Prince, for these monsters seemed to be somewhat easier to deal with than the ones he had encountered in Azad. But now he was more interested in another enemy - the girl who tried to attack him. She had already managed to get to her feet and, with a cheeky grin, twisted two unusual swords with wide blades in her hands. Her armor was light and facilitated rapid movement, making agility her main advantage. The prince, without hesitation, rushed to her, but, unlike the sand creatures, he met serious resistance. The girl easily blocked the blows of his sword, only stepping back little by little. At some point, the Prince realized that his efforts were not just in vain, they were even harmful - his enemy was accumulating strength for a retaliatory breakthrough and, foreseeing the bad outcome of the battle, deceived her and instead of another blow, jumped back. And he was right - the girl in black furiously rushed at him, unleashing a hail of blows on the Prince.

"It seems that the Empress has greatly overestimated your abilities!" The stranger said suddenly. The prince was somewhat

surprised to find that he understood her language, although it was completely unknown.

–Empress? he exclaimed.

And this moment, when his attention weakened a little, was used against him: the girl dodged and cut the Prince's cheekbone and eyebrow with a sharp blow from below. The latter jumped back reflexively, avoiding a second, more dangerous blow that could have ripped open his chest and shouted angrily:

–Scum!

At this time, four more pairs of orange eyes appeared behind his enemy's back - the guards arrived in time. The prince was not at a loss and pushed one of the enemies right at her, causing the stranger to fall, dropping her swords.

"Kill him!" She shouted menacingly, and hurried away through the same door from which the guards had run out, preventing the Prince from taking out all his anger. She had no opportunity to take the weapon back.

Enraged, the Prince, the wound not so deep, but very burning, rushed at the squad of guards and dispatched them, one by one, in a matter of seconds. He jumped over the first one, threw him over himself and immediately pushed him into the abyss with a strong blow of his shoulder. Grabbing the club from the ground, he struck the second one in the head with such force that he even dropped it from his hands. By inertia, turning another turn, the Prince jumped to strike the third in turn with his leg and sword, and, crouching, made a sharp lunge upwards, ripping open the chest of the latter. After that, he finished off the second enemy with a blow to the stomach, who was still lying stunned by the club. And without wasting a second, the Prince rushed after this ugly girl, bursting with thirst for revenge. He recognized her from the first moment. That vague silhouette that flashed in the night when their ship was engulfed in flames - it was her! And now she continues to haunt him! Perhaps for a while she thought that the Prince had drowned, but now the enemy wants to kill him again. Oh, how he hated her! But, in addition to revenge, the Prince wanted to learn more from her about the Empress and this place, and was ready to use force for this.

Running down the curved corridor, he found himself in front of the entrance to a dilapidated tower. It towered on the other side of the abyss, over which a stone bridge was thrown. He looked reliable enough, and the Prince quickly moved to the other side. Now his path was blocked by a door - once strong and impenetrable. But now it was covered with a dense network of cracks, crumbled and slanted with time. Feeling her with his hands and tapping her a little, the Prince stepped back and pushed her forcefully with his shoulder. The blow echoed with pain, but the door gave way - several pieces broke

off and fell inside. After kicking a couple more times, the Prince was able to make an opening of a suitable size and crawled inside. In the hall in which he found himself, there was a gaping blackness instead of a floor - it had collapsed a long time ago, and with it - the columns that held the upper tiers.

The prince stood on a small ledge at the very entrance. On the opposite side, he could see a corridor that he most likely needed to get into, but first he had to find a way to do it. He looked around and found that the destruction that had eaten away at the walls of the tower from the inside had played into his hands: several rows of bricks had collapsed into the abyss and formed ledges. Narrow and dangerous, but wasn't that how his whole journey and his whole life had been for the past seven years? He was constantly balancing over the abyss on a slack thin rope, constantly swayed from side to side by the wind of circumstances. Therefore, the Prince saw it not as a danger as an opportunity. He stepped onto one of these ledges and slowly began to make his way along the wall, carefully but rather hastily feeling each next brick, moving his hands from time to time. When he almost reached the corner, he was forced to stop - here the wall became solid, and he could not move further. But, on the adjoining it, another ledge was visible. The prince examined it carefully, evaluated each of the nearby bricks, and jumped diagonally, turning in the air. Not trusting only one ledge, he tried to catch his hands on the recess in the wall above him at the same time. And for good reason - as soon as he touched the bricks, they crawled under his feet and fell somewhere down. The prince hung on his outstretched arms, but he was not confused or frightened - he slightly pulled his legs up and continued, moving his arms, moving to the right, periodically feeling the support under his feet.

After overcoming about half the long wall of the hall, the Prince climbed over the massive stone partition and gave his hands a rest. Then he had to choose whether to continue along the next narrow ledge to the very entrance to the corridor or, pushing harder, jump to the cliff near the opposite wall, around which a small section of the floor was preserved - along it he could go around the ledge and get to the coveted corridor. The prince decided that he had already lost too much time, so he chose the quick way - jump.

Once near the ledge, the Prince hurried around it and, making another light jump, proceeded along the corridor, the floor of which was intact. Soon he saw the entrance to a hall, separated by a wall of water pouring from the arch. Not far away lay a large wooden shield that the Prince had nearly tripped over. He had no idea where he was going, but he believed that his enemy could only run in one direction, although she clearly knew an easier and faster way.

"Where else can she go?" flashed through the Prince's mind, after which he threw himself through the water and saw a girl standing with her back to him, who only gave him a brief glance, not at all intending to continue the battle. In a matter of seconds, strange golden swirls swirled around her, and she was almost completely engulfed in a cloud that was familiar to the Prince, or seemed very similar to what he had seen in Azad. Without stopping, he raised his sword above his head and, running to the cloud, struck the enemy with all his strength. But he only cut the air - the girl seemed to evaporate. The cloud swallowed her and she disappeared.

"What kind of tricks are these?" thought the Prince and took a step forward. This last step was hardly fully understood. Something was pulling him forward, either curiosity or an old habit. The cloud around him erupted with a vengeance, and the vortexes swirled in a spiral, lifting the Prince into the air against his will.

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Rahim, who unwittingly became the leader of the detachment, preferred not to take risks and therefore entrusted the leadership of the sortie to Madid and Nayzir. Two experienced bodyguards, they knew how to be secretive, and if something happened, they knew how to stand up for themselves and others. Haraz was dead, and they were no longer bound by any obligation to protect him everywhere, putting Haraz's life above the rest.

Together with them, Haadin and Hafez went to the ship. When the crew hid behind the ridge, Toufan gave them important instructions - they were to unfurl the sails as soon as they had a chance and steer the ship to a safe distance from the shore. After that, the rest of the team, sitting in ambush, will wait for the guard squad and, taking it by surprise, will kill the enemy. Then they will be able to get on the ship and leave the place without hindrance. No one except Rahim and perhaps Iman wanted to wait for the Prince at all - it was too dangerous, and the Prince's mission was too hopeless. But it wasn't that important now, so no one started arguments ahead of time.

The morning fog was still swirling over the water, and this was to the advantage of the squad - the scouts had a chance to get on the ship unnoticed. All four quietly dived into the water and tried to swim as close to the vessel as possible so that no one would accidentally see them. When they reached the side of the ship, they, one by one, began to climb the anchor cable.

But almost from the very beginning, everything did not go according to plan. From nowhere, about two dozen enemy soldiers appeared on the shore - they were clearly heading for the boats and

this could completely spoil everything. Without waiting for a signal from Madid's group, Rahim decided to attack the enemy detachment while it was still on the shore. He, as well as Iman and Navid, had weapons, the others had only clubs and stones. Rahim wanted to get as close to them as possible, and only then attack openly. But then chance intervened again - Farang, who was running along the rocky shore, stumbled, fell and slashed his leg on a sharp cobblestone, letting out a loud cry that attracted the attention of the soldiers. To make matters worse, they didn't know who exactly they were going to face. There, at sea, during the storm, the enemy almost did not show his face, and no one could have imagined that instead of ordinary people, real monsters would appear in front of them - with glowing orange eyes, with animal skulls instead of faces. Such an appearance of the enemy confused Rahim's detachment, someone even stepped back in horror. These monstrous masks inspired some kind of natural fear. But the fight was inexorably approaching, and it was unlikely that it would be possible to avoid it.

Meanwhile, Madid's detachment managed to get onto the ship. There was almost no one on deck, and despite a similar reaction from meeting the enemy face to face, they managed to quickly deal with the enemy. One of the soldiers who walked along the side was thrown into the water by Naysir. Another fell in battle with Haadin and Hafes. Then, the four of them, surrounded and quickly finished off two more. Their swords sank into the bodies of these soldiers like butter. Moreover, minor wounds did not prevent them from continuing the battle in any way. Only cutting off limbs or piercing through with a sword helped. After death, these soldiers did not fall to the ground, but dissolved into thin air, turning into a golden cloud carried away by the wind.

Their goal was close, but then some screams were heard from the shore and Madid ran to the bow of the ship to see what was happening on the shore. And, realizing what was going on, he decided to deviate from the plan:

"Hurry, we have to help them!"

"We don't stand a chance!" Hafez said anxiously. He wanted to hold the ship at all costs, their only chance of salvation.

"We must try!" Naizir barked at him. He wasn't enthusiastic about the idea either, but he knew they had no choice.

Meanwhile, on the shore, an enemy detachment was pushing Rahim and his men to the walls of the fortress. The forces were uneven, especially since Toufan was helping Farang get up and out of sight by finding a new hiding place.

There was no time to delay, and all four left the ship, hurrying to the aid of Rahim's detachment, taking the enemy's weapons. Fortunately, there was a boat near the other side, getting into which,

Madid's detachment was able to get to the shore much faster. Without waiting for the boat to hit the rocks, they jumped out of it and ran to the enemy knee-deep in water. It was not a matter of heroism or honor - they all understood that the four of them could not cope with the ship and the choice of course. Moreover, the ship could not have food and water supplies - it was a vessel more for quick attacks and assaults than for long voyages. And so they can't do without Toufan. And, albeit clumsy, but sharp-eyed Farang too. The sea will devour them even faster than this island.

"Hey, you! Naizir shouted, being the first to run ashore.

Their appearance briefly brought confusion into the ranks of the enemy. The soldiers began to turn around, waiting for someone else to appear. These seconds were enough for several heavy stones to reach their target, stunning enemies on the head and knocking them to the ground unconscious. But the two detachments were not destined to unite. The enemy soldiers saw the light in time and went on the offensive, dividing into two groups, eight fighters in each. Realizing that their chances of winning were almost zero, each of the groups of Persians ran in opposite directions.

During the general commotion, everyone forgot about Farang, who hid among the rocks and moaned softly in pain. Fortunately for him, the enemy also forgot about him - the young man was relatively safe in his shelter. Now their large squad turned into three shards, each of which meant almost nothing individually - none of them posed a danger to the guards of the fortress. Besides, they had just gotten rid of the Prince, the best warrior among them. Someone like him is worth five, and perhaps they will regret that they decided to leave him in such a hurry.

The Ghost simply could not call everything he saw anything other than a failure. He considered the Prince to be completely responsible for what had happened, but this did not diminish the mistakes of the rest of the team. They took on such a difficult task, relying only on luck! Fools, no less. And these events, apparently, are only the beginning of their misadventures. Will he find a way to help them? Or is their fate similar to that of the Prince - to disappear without a trace on this island, falling into one of the many traps?

Completely different was the Maharaja's attack on the Island, which the Ghost was watching in parallel. He could already see two times at the same time quite easily; At the same time, they did not mix in his mind, but flowed in separate streams, each in its own direction.

The Maharaja seemed to know where he was going from the beginning. With his strong hand and strong will, he led his small army into battle and moved forward confidently. After the defeat on the shore, the guards of the fortress could no longer meet him fully

armed and give a worthy rebuff. Not only did he breach some wall on the outer island, but he broke through the defenses of the entire Island, changing the balance of power with one decisive blow. And the further he moved inside the fortress, the less resistance he encountered. Of course, the Empress had a few more trump cards up her sleeve, but the chances of dealing with the uninvited guests became much less.

The soldiers of the Maharaja had no trouble capturing the vessel and then shelling the fortress with the ship's guns. The breaches in the walls allowed the ground party to rush inside the fortress, towards the mysterious and dangerous Sands of Time, about which an ancient legend told so colorfully and poetically, which was told to Maharaja by a vagabond.

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An unimaginable and indescribable feeling. The one that cannot be felt. The prince sank into the Sand as if in a mist, enveloping it gently and neatly, absorbing it and lifting it slightly above the floor. He did not cause pain or inconvenience - he did not get into his eyes, he could see through him freely, and this amazed the Prince even more - he saw and felt two realities at the same time. He remembered the feeling that the dagger drove into him and what he was capable of, and realized how modest his ideas about the true power of the Sands were. Then one reality began to flow smoothly into another, no cruelty or struggle, except for a certain firm persistence, and that, perhaps, is almost imperceptible. The first reality flowed away like a dream, like sand through his fingers, crumbled and crumbled before his eyes, but collapsed gracefully and smoothly. It was not death, there was no pain in it. This means that it does not disappear anywhere, except from the consciousness of the Prince. But is so much given to man that his consciousness contains two or more realities? And so the Prince, losing the weightless thread that connected him with the old one, where there were only ruins, seemed to flow into the new one. And the past reality just let him go.

The thread was completely broken, only fragments of memories remained, and he stepped towards the unknown. The sands still gently let him go, as if calling him to return more than once, and maybe one day even merge with them into something inseparable. Like with a dagger, but in such a way that you can't just let go of your hand, but in some other way. Fall in love with the sands. To get used to them, to get lost in them, to live for them, to hear them, to think about them, to become them... If the Prince didn't know their true nature, he would most likely succumb to their charms.

He managed to find what he was looking for - a time portal that seems to have transported him to the past. The gradual realization of this inspired him, and he also experienced a kind of delight, such as children experience when faced with something completely new.

Chapter 12. Modern times

I have spent many days and nights in constant thought and conversation with the Sands. Yes, perhaps, this can be called a conversation. I moved from mere contemplation to a dialogue in which I first ask a question and then get an answer. Only instead of the usual – the language of reason, pure consciousness. Sometimes the answers were quick and simple, but sometimes it took me a long time to get to them: I went through the options and watched the reaction of the Sands, I read the past and the future in search of the right solutions or patterns. Sometimes it seemed that with the help of the Sands, the answers matured faster, as if they were speeding up time. Sometimes I literally wanted to reach out and grab an idea that was hanging in the air. But then I realized that it was in my mind and it was more important to understand its very essence, to grasp the underlying principle. The study of patterns is what will help me and my people in overcoming many difficulties, because many troubles and fears are born of simple ignorance.

Over time, ideas began to come to me even in my dreams, when I was far from the Abyss. But it seemed to me that the Sands began to spread across the Island. At first, the locket beckoned them, but now they felt a certain freedom. They didn't emit that shine – you couldn't see them at all. But I felt their light, trembling presence. And now it so happened that there was no need for me to go to the Abyss at all - I could indulge in shallow reflection right at my desk.

I tried to define for myself the most general range of tasks. What did I fight against and what did I achieve? Perhaps all this was a fight between man and nature. After all, it is she who decides what to give and what to take. Storms, cold, crop failures, raids of wild animals - all this is in her power. But now it's time to build stronger and warmer dwellings, it is better to choose the time for sowing. And for each task, I have to find my own recipe, I have to explain it and pass it on to people. All these ideas... People will receive them from me, ready and almost perfect. And I myself receive them from the Sands. Can the idea in this case be considered one's own? And in any other case, we don't know where they come from. Or rather, now I know, but perhaps I still don't understand. Any thought is a flash in the darkness of the mind, but does the person himself ignite it? Is there his merit in this or is everything given to him by nature? But what are Sands and Fate if not a part of nature, or a part of this world, if you look more broadly? A world that I am now trying my best to know as deeply as possible.

In order to get something new, better than the old one, it was necessary to stop taking only what nature gave as a gift, but also to learn to get what better helps in solving the problem. The rocks

behind the ruined castle were full of stone, from which you can build houses and even entire fortresses, because solid stones are much better than burnt clay. In addition, - sometimes it happened that I saw the Island as if through - it turned out that the rocks were rich in metal deposits. They will make more advanced tools and weapons - all that remains is to put the smelting process on paper for future generations and pass it on to people in words. I found some regularities in the movement of the moon and changes in the weather. I could see the days that were most favorable for sowing or harvesting, and I could, in part, explain them to others. I must change the people themselves, their consciousness, their relationships. To give their lives more meaning, to show them a goal or a path. They needed a miracle that they would believe in, and I had one. I can heal all the sick myself, or I can teach a few people in my circle to do the same. And it is not at all necessary for this to lead everyone through the ritual that healed me – often it is enough to know medicinal herbs and recipes for their preparation – there is no point in listing all this here, for this I will start many other books, where each direction will be described in detail.

In the end, it was time to change the image of the Ruler. Not only mine, but also subsequent ones. Starting with myself, I want to erase what was before and become just one of my people. My task is to show the way, and the Ring of Rulers, as a symbol of some kind of power, should remain in the past. Now it has a completely different purpose. Why will there be a need for a Ruler in the future, if people will be in the careful hands of Fate?

Of course, all this will not happen immediately - neither I nor they are ready for this yet. But the time will come and pretty soon! It seems that every night I see in my dreams a huge castle, majestically towering over the plains where people live, which is visible from far away from the sea. And my mind is the window through which the dream will flow into the reality in which I will wake up one day. It will be a symbol of the new time, the power and greatness of the Island - as long as people need it. Until they realize that even this will not be so important. But by that time I will be gone – I don't plan to live forever after all, and the Island and the people will be completely different. Who knows what skills they will acquire by that time?

The fates that I continued to avidly read with the help of the Ring - for this, after all, I invariably had to go to the Abyss - at first glance seemed to be absolute chaos. They walked parallel and opposite each other. They converged and diverged. Sometimes they got lost or very unexpectedly broke off - and therefore the overall picture was not always clear. At times, they were incredibly complex – with going back in time – in order for something to happen, you had to first live through one version to prepare the ground for the correct

version. I don't understand all the mysteries yet, I don't understand how you can move in time except mentally, but I'm surprised to discover that Fate can be flexible. Any event planned by it will happen in one way or another, at the right time and in the right place. But there was little room to influence exactly how this would happen. The smallest, as thin as a hair, infinitesimal – so small that a person will not even be able to see them. But this did not destroy my theory in any way, but only strengthened it. The fact is that human consciousness consists of thoughts and feelings, and although they are in the hands of Fate, they are sometimes a little spontaneous and unpredictable. But this cannot affect the course of life – only the attitude towards it changes. After all, no matter what happens, what matters is what you and others have about it.

I don't know if people will need everything that I have, the deep knowledge that I seek. My locket – what if everyone had one? And the same question applies to the Ring and everything else that I will still be able to create. Will I be able to fill the entire Island with Sands, to infuse it into the consciousness of every person? Will there be those who will not accept them? Though... Such people, perhaps, have already been found, at least one. And I shouldn't repeat my mistakes, I should start with deeds, not words. I will leave them for this diary.

Namtar's Journal, Entry 23

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The island has changed tremendously since Namtar discovered the Sands and learned its power. Only a couple of years passed, and decline was replaced by prosperity. The ruins of the ancient castle were restored, although it was more likely that it was almost rebuilt - a huge fortress now towered in the center of the Island, surrounded by rocks and the Wasteland (the name has been preserved since ancient times, now these places were covered with dense forests, interspersed with green fields), declaring its greatness from afar. It was no longer a place of remembrance of the past, with all its dilapidated statues and gloomy halls, but the true heart of the Island. And his mind. Namtar was so inspired and fascinated by the capabilities of the Sands that he worked tirelessly, almost day and night, studying them. More and more new knowledge literally saturated him. It was not only knowledge about the structure of the world – it was, of course, also interesting, but to some extent useless. The sands were able to endow the human mind with new ideas, knowledge, guesses, and literally about everything. They, like small sparks, flashed in the darkness of human consciousness. And this light made it possible to see something even greater. Immersing

himself daily in the whirlpool of this knowledge, Namtar drew more and more new ideas for the improvement of the Island. And he was incredibly inspired by how endless these possibilities were. Truly colossal, endless!

He began by building a new castle and expanding it. Earlier, in ancient times, his ancestors considered this place to be something like a temple, for worship and mysterious rites and sacrifices. Now this place will become a new home for him and his family and will open a new page in the history of the Island. Spacious bright halls, rooms, places for walking and studying - and this is just the beginning! Soon after, the castle was expanded even further - it was home not to one family, but to all the nobility of the Island. Huge canteens, a library, workshops and even a prison appeared. With each passing month, Namtar's vision became clearer: he was not just creating a castle, it was a real city. A city that became the center of all life on the Island. No one had done this on the Island before him. People used to live in one-story settlements at the foot of the mountains. Someone in the dwellings was poorer, someone was richer, but there was no special system in this. People just lived, cultivated crops, hunted and solved other pressing problems. Now Namtar wanted to make sense of it all. The ring revealed to him a future full of possibilities, among which the construction of a fortress-city was only the starting point. He and his people had a lot to learn, to learn many secrets of existence and the wisdom of various sciences on the way to universal prosperity.

At the same time, Namtar did not at all try to build an ideal world in which everyone would be happy and satisfied. He understood that fate would take its toll anyway. It was she who guided him - he saw in the fog of predictions a place full of opportunities and people full of knowledge. It was up to them to decide how to use them. But he was not going to give this freedom to everyone at once. He wanted to divide this path into many steps, some of which, probably, would have to be taken not by him, but by his followers.

Therefore, now most of the inhabitants of the Island remained simple peasants and artisans. But in order to strengthen his position and power, Namtar tried to earn the trust of all. To earn his power by proving in practice that he is a wise, just and merciful ruler. The kind that his people now need as a landmark in the darkness. At some point, he decided to issue his own money. He, with the help of Peski, managed to discover a huge gold deposit, which was used to mint coins. They were valued much higher than the old iron ones, which quickly fell into disrepair. With these coins, he generously paid those who hired to build the castle. He personally supervised the construction process, from creating an image in his head to training

the workers. Every day, he found ways to make the job easier and faster. But this was not enough for him. He wanted to use the magic of the Sands not only to gain knowledge, but also to directly use it in construction - literally lifting weights and hewing stones with it. If he had coped with this task, then his power would have become absolute, unshakable and he would have been able to implement everything he had planned. And his people would follow him into the future from his visions.

He also paid generously to those who got food. Namtar valued every person on the Island and wished that no one would feel undeservedly deprived or simply a slave. He understood that he could not walk the intended path alone. Therefore, the knowledge that he acquired during his dives in Peski, he sought to pass on to others. Since the castle became habitable again, he founded a school for the chosen ones, who together with him comprehended the mysteries of the Sands. Of course, he retained the right of exclusive possession of them, not allowing any of his students to go directly to the Abyss, but he told them about almost everything he managed to learn.

Thanks to the tireless work of Namtar and his disciples, forgotten and almost lost crafts were revived. A blacksmith's workshop was opened at the castle, where metal smelting was carried out. This process was constantly improved and over time made it possible to obtain the necessary tools and products in a short time.

Namtar has always sought to emphasize the unity of the inhabitants of the Island, not to separate himself from the commoners, but rather to become closer to them. One of the symbols of this rapprochement was the construction of a road connecting the settlement and the castle. Previously, it was a bumpy and winding path, poorly suited not only for transporting goods, but even for the movement of people. In addition, in an effort to go beyond simple symbols, Namtar sought to expand his school - he endowed some of his students with special powers and they occasionally left the castle for the settlement to pass on knowledge and skills to ordinary people. This, in the end, even gave them some independence. Some of them, carried away by the teachings and ideas of the Mentors, as Namtar himself called them, followed them to the castle. There they were allowed to quench their thirst for knowledge in exchange for labor. Some of them remained in the castle forever, mastering one craft or another, or even joining the ranks of Namtar's apprentices, while others returned as a completely different person. The sands transformed people, made them more purposeful and broadened their horizons.

The next craft that Namtar considered incredibly important, and which was also highly valued, was medicine. It was revered as a

special sacrament, which was possessed only by the chosen ones, and was in great demand. The healers knew the recipes for special decoctions and herbal tinctures - they also drew this knowledge from the Sands. In special cases, Namtar himself helped the sick by using healing magic. He will forever remember how the Sands healed him, and he sought to share this blessing with people. But only with those who really needed it. For the rest, his abilities were another confirmation of his uniqueness and importance to people.

The society that Namtar was building could develop on its own to a certain extent, but they also needed a leader like him to help them move forward, sometimes in the most unexpected directions. Sometimes he had to break established customs and orders. One example of such events was Namtar's invention of a new calendar and a way of calculating time. At first, no one understood why it was necessary to divide the year not into seasons, as before, but into smaller months, and theirs into weeks. But over time, people realized that it is much easier to determine the time of planting and harvesting in this way. Months and weeks were tied to the stars and the moon, and time itself became more valuable and understandable – now it could be measured, and therefore easier to plan. The same is with individual days - Namtar ordered to divide them into hours, and these, in turn, into minutes and seconds. And if the latter served only for a relative assessment of time and were difficult to measure (although over time people acquired a certain intuition in estimating small time intervals), then clocks could easily be identified by the sun. The idea itself was not new, but Namtar more sharply outlined its boundaries, allowed time to be measured by numbers, and introduced a new way of life. Subsequently, one of his students came up with a way to measure much smaller periods of time with good accuracy, without even being attached to the sun. The idea was quite obvious, Namtar liked it very much, and he even regretted that he hadn't reached it on his own. It was as follows: glassblowers (another craft born on the Island) could make such a vessel, which consisted of two cavities connected by a narrow neck and closed with corks on both sides. If it was necessary to measure a certain amount of time, one of the plugs was opened, a certain amount of sand was poured into the upper vessel and closed again. Sand slowly poured through the neck from the upper vessel to the lower one. As soon as the last grain of sand rolled down, the end of the dimension came. And if you turn this Hourglass upside down, then the lower vessel is at the top and the measurement is repeated. Since then, this device has become ubiquitous and has become something familiar and irreplaceable. And there were countless uses for it.

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Namtar was deeply convinced of the correctness of his path. He knew the power of fate and the power that it allows him to achieve. He was not at all depressed by the fact that he knew a lot in advance. Moreover, the Ring showed him that he would do only great things, and this only inspired him. Oh, how wrong he had been before, thinking that his life was coming to an end! He almost resigned himself to his death, soaked in it and accepted it. Maybe those who say that death is the beginning of a new life are right?

And he wanted his path to be accessible not only to him, but also to others. He tried to share his knowledge and skills in every possible way, although he retained his primacy in all matters. He convinced the others of the inevitability of fate and its power, over and over again not missing an opportunity to demonstrate it - at night, in silence, he went alone to the Abyss and with the help of the Ring looked into the flow of time, reading the fates of people, and in the morning he retold them what he saw. A few days passed, and these people returned to Namtar, but with a completely different perception of his teachings. His words were confirmed in their lives; Everything he described happened in reality. In the eyes of people, Namtar increasingly acquired the image if not of a deity, then of a messenger of the gods. And he felt the same way. After all, it was not to anyone else, but to him that the Sands appeared, revealed their secrets and shared their wisdom. He was entrusted with the most important task - to be a guide for other people in this new element, to be their teacher and leader. The world was changing, becoming different – and he was its messiah.

At the same time, he did not seek to impose his will by force. He was too confident in the power of fate, which would still direct everyone in the right direction with its own hand. No one can escape it and no one can change it. The new laws he proclaimed were aimed at preserving the accumulated knowledge, its sacredness and inviolability. Anyone who harmed the Island and its inhabitants had to be punished. In addition, some places on the Island have become forbidden, such as the Abyss. A special security detachment was created to make sure that no one got into the holy of holies. Those who disobeyed were thrown into prison. Of course, Namtar himself could keep track of all the violators in the flow of fates, but why? He did not consider it necessary to waste time and effort on this. It is easier to keep people within certain limits, accustoming them to order and compliance with the law, than to intimidate them and try to keep everything under personal control.

Over time, the guards of the castle became more and more. It was no longer a small group of people who somehow knew how to hold weapons, but a significant force, with a certain hierarchy and

even insignia. This class had certain privileges, they were allowed to live on the outskirts of the castle and have more days to rest than the rest. If it happened that the criminal was a member of the guard squad, then the punishment for him was more severe than for ordinary people - in some cases even death.

A significant role in the life of the palace guards was played by blacksmithing, which was rapidly developing on the Island. Yesterday, craftsmen were able to make rough and inconvenient axes, and a year later - elegant blades, light and sharp. Deadly, like a snake bite. And in addition to them - pikes and halberds, throwing axes and chakras. Bows and crossbows, brass knuckles and daggers – you name it. The guards of the Island were feared and respected. But without a good reason, its members did not attack or threaten anyone.

Over time, the guards became a rather closed group, with their own rules and customs. It was unimaginably difficult to get into it, and even more so to become one of them. Most often, a place in the ranks of the detachment was inherited. Each of the servicemen prepared a successor for himself, raising his sons in constant training, accustoming them to weapons from an early age and the idea that this was their destiny.

Zulu, a man of strong physique with great strength, was appointed commander of the guard. In addition, he was strong in spirit, tough, at the same time very intelligent and even cunning. None of the subordinates could even think of taking his place. His will and prudence helped to strengthen the detachment and turn it into a serious force. Namtar had known him for a long time and trusted him enough to appoint him to such a position.

Namtar's decision transformed the court for criminals and dispute resolution. Previously, it existed only in the form of a people's gathering, during which people, through shouting, swearing, and sometimes fights, made decisions on certain incidents. Sometimes several families were affected at once - these are dozens of people, and from so many interests, the gathering turned into chaos. It rarely happened that everyone was satisfied. Now decisions on disputes and crimes were made by a council of elders - people who were wise and had undergone special training. Their reasoning was based on a careful study of the details of the incident, as well as logic and common sense. There was no room for emotions, and in order to intimidate those who interfered with shouts or in any other way, it was decided that the castle guards would maintain order. The court's decisions were final, and disobeying his will was considered a crime. At first, people did not accept such a reform very warmly, but they were forced to put up with it. Over time, she gained supporters -

mainly those whom the court managed to protect, and people became more careful and respectful in their relationships.

Thanks to new knowledge, skills and tools, the inhabitants began to settle all over the Island - some in an area more favorable for agriculture or hunting. Someone was more comfortable living on the coast - there they fished, got pearls. Settlements grew, and their number grew. The network of roads between them expanded, and bridges were erected where rivers flowed. At the intersections of the roads, there were signposts. The island was simply unrecognizable if you compare it with what it was like five years ago.

The rapid development of crafts, literacy and a new way of life have greatly contributed to the formation of another direction of life on the Island - trade. There was competition between settlements, you could always choose a product to your liking. In addition to the local bazaars, a huge market square was opened near the walls of the castle. A place on it was especially valued, even though it was necessary to pay a tax for the right to trade. In addition, various services became the subject of sale - someone even managed to earn money on the transportation of goods and goods.

Almost all of this was formed by itself – Namtar only created the necessary conditions and issued a single monetary unit. And also - it was he who came up with the idea of opening a large market near the walls of the castle. People were not supposed to separate from each other. The exchange of experience, trade and competition - all this helped to develop the Island and form a new consciousness. Namtar literally created a miracle with his own hands, and now he could live almost on his own.

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Namtar did not forget about his diary - now he kept it almost daily, but most often it was brief - he did not describe everything, but only made a summary of his thoughts and feelings, as well as his discoveries and new ideas. His mind would simply be cramped in one small book. But now the diary had another important task - it helped him to remain himself. which he could run his eyes over at once, allowed him to always firmly remember who he was. Sometimes he was afraid that his mind would get lost in the world of the Sands, dissolve in them, and he would cease to be himself. He, of course, did not consider them to be some kind of evil. The danger was in the limitlessness of possibilities. "*They are like an ocean engulfed in a storm, a powerful and indomitable element - if you yawn a little, you will be washed away by the wave and dragged into the abyss*" - this is exactly what he wrote in his diary.

However, perhaps, even with all his desire, he could not be verbose, as before. Immersed in the study of Peski - for him it was neither religion nor science - he became more and more restrained and purposeful. His inherent sensuality and emotionality, which were especially manifested when it came to paper, faded away. Instead, he began to rely more and more on the power of his mind, gradually leaning towards the idea that sooner or later he would be able to comprehend anything. At the same time, feelings are not a manifestation of a person's imperfection, or an idle waste of time. In any case, he believed that any feeling can, if desired, be replaced by the power of thought, clearly and elegantly built. And he certainly had reason to think so – instead of spilling his thoughts on paper, not knowing exactly what he was doing and why, he was now thinking, working and transforming the world and the people around him. And he inevitably changed himself, although against the background of his successes and achievements, this hardly seemed important.

Who knows how much the Sands influenced him, but there was obviously another reason why he became so - withdrawn and a little detached. His eyes did not burn with the same fire because of their protracted quarrel with his son. It could hardly be called enmity, but rather mutual indifference. Nergal saw no point in communication - so strong did their contradictions seem to him. All these years he did not waste time. He was preparing to sail - he was going to choose a good time to leave the Island once and for all, believing that his father was leading his people into a dead end. And after certain successes, it will inevitably collapse. At one time, as it seemed to him, he tried all methods of persuasion and influence, but in vain. Although, in Nergal's opinion, it was obvious that his father was mistaken, and the story of his illness and miraculous recovery only confirms this. It is foolish to believe in fate, after Namtar managed to defeat death, which was already literally on the doorstep! After all, it turned out that everything rather depended on the efforts of a person and his aspirations. And, probably, a small accident that always takes place in life. Namtar, on the contrary, considered this to be an ideal proof of his ideas. Especially since he was able to see the timeline and read thousands of other people's fates with the help of the Ring. I was able to practically touch this subtle matter with my own hands, study and measure it. He even managed, after several attempts, to assess how close the Fate (in his diary he wrote this word with a capital letter), predicted by the Sands, was close to the truth, to reality. There were some non-fundamental deviations, which, perhaps, were explained by the inaccuracy of his knowledge, some gaps in it. Of course, he himself, at times, was frightened by such an all-consuming predetermination and inevitability. Arranged in this

way, the world relegated it to the role of a small part of a giant mechanism, but in return it gave life some meaning.

Nergal believed that one day he might return to the Island, many years later, when his father was gone, and he himself would be able to find a recipe in distant lands that would help him rebuild the Island and lay a truly solid foundation for the future. He had supporters who were ready to go on a journey with him, towards a new life. He was truly angry at his father for his blindness, but their conflict was more cold than openly hostile. And, besides, Nergal did not hesitate to enjoy the fruits of the current achievements of Namtar and his school. With the help of revived crafts, he was able to begin the construction of two ships. Sometimes he even secretly used the workers of Namtar who were engaged in the construction of the castle. In addition, thanks to free trade, he could get as much metal as he wanted. The construction of ships was slow - Nergal did not want to make mistakes. Sometimes he experimented and built small ships, testing his solutions - at the same time, he perfectly studied all the surrounding waters. If the tests were successful, these decisions were transferred to the main vessels. A series of trials and errors, which was sometimes slowed down by difficulties in obtaining a particular resource, stretched over several years. During this time, Nergal matured and not only confirmed his thoughts, but also thought out a detailed plan for his journey, all possible problems and failures. He has a supply of enough weapons - after all, it is not at all a fact that the meetings that await them at sea or on a new land will be peaceful. He came up with a way to navigate by the stars. He attributed his successes to his own determination and refused to attach much importance to the power of the Sands.

On the day Nergal sailed with his crew from the Island, Namtar's diary contained only a brief and dry one:

Our paths diverged completely. Probably, Peski knew this too. Fate is inevitable.

Since then, Namtar has become even more withdrawn and detached. He no longer tried to constantly restrain and control himself, instead he completely devoted himself to work. But its direction remained the same - the transformation of the Island into a special place. Therefore, he did not completely hide from everyone, locking himself in the back rooms of the castle, but only appointed more assistants who carried out all sorts of errands, including working with books. But at the same time, he did not trust anyone with matters that required his personal presence and control. Therefore, he could hardly be called a hermit. He simply reformed his relationship with the people, putting aside the task of maintaining his

authority – believing that he was already large enough – and doing more important things.

Jatta followed Namtar everywhere. She was his best and only true friend. In her company, he found solace and peace. How good it was that he had found it once! A faithful friend who seemed to understand him perfectly, but could not answer. He looked into her eyes and saw an almost human gaze. At such moments, he was suddenly seized by the desire to become a real hermit-vagabond, wandering around the world. He could still be looking for new knowledge, and Jatta would follow him to the ends of the earth! But unfortunately, he couldn't take Peski with him. And he was responsible for the entire Island, his brainchild, for all people and their destinies. He could not go anywhere, of course, it was only a momentary weakness, fatigue - nothing more. He is in his place, at the right time and state of mind. And he was constantly in the company of a wonderful friend.

Sometimes, in the hours of especially hard work, it happened that Namtar forgot about everything in the world, plunging once again into the abyss of knowledge. And then Jatta, who seemed to be getting bored, approached her master and laid her head on his lap. If that didn't work, she timidly licked his hand, and then Namtar shuddered, came to his senses, and knew it was time to take a break. Maybe it was a good thing that he couldn't take Peski with him? Walks with Jatta in the abandoned garden helped him to relax, and it was with his mind. At such moments, all thoughts disappeared from him, and he just walked. And then, instead of heavy and clumsy, came fresh thoughts, quick and agile. He again felt the strength to create further and went back - to the library, to the Abyss or to his chambers.

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The school founded by Namtar lived according to its own, special rules. It was a society within a society. It had little or no direct involvement in the life of the Island, except for those who had become Mentors, and its members had more liberties than others. They were closer to Namtar than anyone else and helped him in the development of his teachings. They were allowed to contact the Sands, but at a distance. Each of them was known to the palace guards by sight, Namtar selected all of them personally, so he trusted them almost as himself. Although he could hardly be mistaken - thanks to the Ring, he literally saw through people, knew in advance what they were going to do or say. Together with this group of initiates, he tried to penetrate as deep as possible into the secrets of the Sands, so there was an unspoken rule among them - to share all

discoveries with each other (sometimes they worked separately and discovered something amazing alone). Namtar decided that he had to teach the rest of the School by his example, and he constantly talked about how he had progressed. Everyone knew about the Ring and his abilities. At the same time, none of them claimed a special right to own and use it, their leader established clear and understandable rules of relationships that did not imply promotion, ranks, and other things. He is a teacher with a special gift, and they are eternal students. And this was manifested not only in words, but also in deeds - everyone noticed how much more subtly and deeply Namtar understood the Sands, literally felt them, thought with them. They seemed to merge into one. Where he is, there they are. He is their messenger, herald and guide in this world.

Thanks to the joint efforts of all its members, the School has managed to achieve a lot. Sand taught them to concentrate on solving problems, not just going through known options, but coming up with new ones. They learned to look into the very essence of things, to comprehend their structure. Years spent in close contact with the Sands revealed to them the secrets of the movement of the moon, sun and stars across the sky. They learned the passage of time and some of the mysteries of the world. They studied how plants and animals live, which helped them change the way the inhabitants of the Island approach farming and hunting. Now, by following all the rules and regulations (which they had at first distrusted), people could harvest more crops, healthier and even tastier than before. Namtar and his students helped people learn how to build houses from new materials, came up with a lot of ways to process stone and metals. All this knowledge was very useful later, when building the castle.

Day after day, the students, together with their leader, continued to search for answers and ask questions. Sometimes their findings were of no use to ordinary people – such discoveries did not go beyond this narrow circle. But their interests were directed much further than the issues of proper sowing of wheat and smelting of metals. They were a kind of hermits, but they saw a special meaning and a higher purpose in this. All the members of the School wore long robes, with hoods that hid their faces. Their eyes were accustomed to the dim flickering of the candles—they could sit for hours bent over the paper. They had to break for food and sleep, but these things were considered to be a kind of evil spirits that distracted them, as if protecting the secrets of the universe. Therefore, they ate modestly, and slept little. The evening and most of the night were devoted almost every day to exploring the Abyss, and over time, Namtar came to trust his apprentices enough to allow them to watch their descent into the Sands from a distance. Each

time, he performed rituals in front of their eyes with the help of the medallion and the Ring, summoning the Sands from the bowels of the earth. The members of the School believed that it helped her breathe, and in gratitude, she shared her wisdom with them. And they stood next to the Abyss for hours and breathed with it, absorbing new knowledge. Each time - the effect of such a rite lasted for almost a day - each of the members of the School seemed to take a piece of the Sands with him and could study it and feed on it until its power was exhausted.

But there were other people in the fortress-city - those who had little to do with the School. Wealthy townspeople lived a couple of minutes' walk from the northern gate of the castle. The houses in this quarter were well protected from the winds by a ridge of rocks. After some time, this honor was also awarded to the castle guards - it was decided that they should live closer to the place of service - this was both a convenience and a privilege at the same time.

In addition to Namtar's disciples, the elders lived in the castle itself. In addition to them, there were also those who did not become disciples (or did not aspire to become one), but who learned certain parts of the Teaching. They were taught to read and write, and did a variety of jobs, such as acting as a liaison between the School and the rest of the Island's inhabitants, and acting as administrators and responsible for the various directions of the Island's development. Treasurers, clerks, and healers could also be found here. During the day, there were many servants in the castle (they spent the night in their houses, on the outskirts of the castle).

This whole body functioned perfectly. Every part of him—every one of these people—felt the change. Not only external, but also internal. They could say that their consciousness became clearer, their work caused less fatigue than before, and the feeling of anxiety began to visit them very rarely - life became quite calm and measured, although it was associated with constant change. But they were benevolent, had a purpose and meaning. And Namtar, like a heart, constantly drove fresh blood to every corner of this body.

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Namtar's work was largely related to books. Old books served as a source of knowledge for him for a long time. They could trace the history of this place from ancient times - old laws, sometimes customs and beliefs, the names of the rulers and their deeds. In some of them, there was a description of the castle in its previous form, when it was something like a temple. It was much smaller than now, did not have the same scope and was almost not used for living. It served as a place for various rituals, the description of which was also sometimes

found on the pages of ancient books. But they were presented rather poorly and therefore were not particularly understandable. Only here and there was something about the "power of the earth" and about the "benefactor of the moon". It was difficult to understand what this meant, but it was clear from indirect signs that in general we are talking about the worship of natural elements and celestial bodies, among which the moon occupied a special place. Most often, she was depicted in the shape of a crescent moon, turned with her horns down. His guesses were unequivocally confirmed by memories from childhood - his mother told him fairy tales about good and evil deities. But in his time, it was perceived more as myths, half-forgotten and distorted by endless retellings and speculations. The ancient foundations were forgotten, became legends, and the Island itself slowly fell into decay.

However, other knowledge was passed down from generation to generation and did not lose its power. For example, people on the Island have known the secret of making paper since ancient times. This knowledge was considered sacred because it made it possible to create books and preserve wisdom for future generations. Over time, not everyone understood the importance of this tradition, but it managed to survive along with hundreds of dusty and dilapidated volumes. Some of the books have been badly damaged by time, while others have survived almost intact. At different times, they were kept in different places, but mostly they were allocated space in the rooms and halls of the ancient castle.

A large part of all books was occupied by volumes with detailed descriptions of herbs and animals. Everything that ancient people managed to find was carefully sketched by them and, if possible, described in detail. People studied the world around them, although not too deeply, but rather in breadth. Some volumes emphasized the healing properties of plants. Others simply contained long lists of metals, stones, minerals, and so on. Namtar was able to glean useful material even from these lists, but perhaps they were not worth the effort of the ancients.

There were also interesting writings – literally fragments in the most decrepit and unreadable books – for example, one, about the creation of the world. These questions worried Namtar especially when he first discovered the Sands. One of the entries read as follows:

An endless ocean covered everything around. Its majestic waters stretched from horizon to horizon, and only the sky could compare with it. And then the waters opened, and an island appeared, which rushed upwards to the heavens like rocks. [unintelligible] The sleeping children of the waters awoke from oblivion and came ashore. And they lit a fire. As long as they lived on land, time lived

with them, hand in hand. And the heavens have since been placed in their service, changing day by night and night by day. But the ocean...

After that, the recording was cut off. Perhaps the lost part of it spoke of something else important, but it was no longer possible to find out. Namtar spent many hours collecting information like this, but at some point he realized that he was marking time. It was then that an insight descended on him - he had reached the boundaries of ancient knowledge, but he had a much richer source of knowledge in his hands. If he can learn how to properly handle this power and formulate the right questions, then he will be able to surpass the ancient knowledge. And he largely succeeded.

Since then, many new books have been written, and certainly not by him alone. Namtar was incredibly helped by his students. New medicinal reference books appeared, knowledge about minerals and metals was deepened. Truly valuable volumes appeared - they were even made in two copies - about crafts and technologies. Now, even centuries later, it will still be possible to take advantage of the achievements of the Namtar era, simply reproducing the actions described step by step. A new procedure for calculating time was set out on paper, the system of counting and writing was streamlined - there was no end to the records! And even magical techniques and rituals performed with the Sands - all this also found a place in the works of the School and replenished the library of the castle.

The old books were kept in a separate room, but Namtar believed that they were now of almost no value. He was able to surpass the ancients in everything and did not think of stopping. His next task was to put the elements at the service of man, as it once happened with the sky, according to an ancient myth.

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After his son sailed, Namtar was so focused on his work that things went even better than before. It cannot be said that he did not love him and did not regret anything. But he was convinced that all this was prepared for him by fate. He had resigned himself to all her blows beforehand, trying to focus on what was within his control and leave alone what was not. And I found an opportunity to suppress my worries by immersing myself in work. Only occasionally did he go out into the fresh air just to look into the distance, at the sea. And Jatta was always there.

The mountain, located in the center of the Island, was rich in freshwater rivers. Rushing to the foot, they branched into hundreds of small streams and scattered all over the Island. Namtar found inspiration in this, seeing how a dense net feeds the entire Island. He

considered it reasonable to draw ideas from nature - it is always wiser and more inventive than man.

He figured out how to turn the water element into a useful tool for the castle. He diverted the beds of several of the largest rivers to the side, forcing huge wheels to turn. The streams of water, possessing inexhaustible and colossal force, tirelessly rotated them day and night, doing with the help of gears and shafts what man was almost unable to do. With the help of a system of canals and aqueducts that literally pierced through the entire castle, Namtar was able to do anything: lift loads - this greatly accelerated the construction of new parts of the castle and helped the workers in the smithy; raise bridges and open huge gates. With the help of levers, the desired gear took the necessary position, and almost a miracle happened. He failed to get the same from the Sands, Namtar did not succeed in pure magic. But they gave him ideas on how to harness the power of water. And this was no worse and even added food for thought to him.

The system of water wheels, gears and shafts grew rapidly, but there was one special place in the castle from where everything began. At the point where the streams converged, there was a huge tower (it was even higher than the central part of the castle), in which the main distribution system was hidden. Subsequently, it was called the Mechanical Tower. Large and small canals ran away from it, and with the help of gears, shafts and cables, it and its surroundings functioned. Namtar saw great potential in it, knowing that there were many other uses. All you need is time and constant, hard work.

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And although Namtar's fate was not happy - once he lost his wife and daughter, and now he parted with his only son - he did not complain about his life. He found his true purpose by sacrificing personal happiness. His main brainchild was the Island itself - it will remain so long after his death. He created a real home for his people, his name will be glorified through the centuries, songs and legends. Although Namtar did not chase fame at all. Only one question haunted him - where should he strive when he achieves his goal? Will he be able to move at least one more step or will he be left alone with his sadness, being not needed even by the Island?

On the evenings that he went out with Jatta to look at the sea, he thought not only of his son. He also thought about the ocean that he had taken his wife. She was struck, like him, by an unknown disease and withered under its blows. The traditions of his people told them to return the body to the ocean, which gave birth to life,

and then took it back. An eternal cycle according to which nature and people lived. Her death was one of the indirect reasons for Namtar's discord with Nergal - he blamed his father for his lack of will and inaction ruined his mother when he was only ten years old. And the gap between them became even wider and deeper when Namtar himself fell ill. He was afraid of losing his father, and when his miraculous healing happened, he realized that he could not be persuaded. And, blindly trusting fate, he will ruin the Island and its people, despite all his efforts. The discord between them had been brewing for years, and one day it had reached such strength that Nergal simply decided to leave home.

Thanks to the efforts of Namtar and despite all the fears of his son, the Island and the castle continued to be transformed. There was almost no corner that he would not look into and change and improve it. Namtar's old dream has come true - the return of the Island to its former power and greatness. With the help of the Sands, he was able to defeat not only his illness, but also the disease that had eaten the Island for centuries, turning it into an abode of despair and desolation. Now people did not know hunger and disease, they felt safe. Life was gaining momentum everywhere; Like a river that turned a huge wheel, it pulled people with it. The island had reserves of gold and metals, various products and a regular, good harvest. Its lands were vast and fertile. But in addition, there was another treasure – knowledge. The library kept books with accumulated wisdom and experience. Future generations will live much easier than now.

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Of course, the Island, abounding in such riches, over time began to attract a large number of people who wanted to profit from them. In ancient times, people thought that the Island was the only place on Earth and they were the only people, and there was only an ocean around. But a lot of time has passed since then, and everyone has repeatedly been convinced that this is not the case at all. Most often, guests of the Island were not friendly towards its inhabitants.

After the raids began, Namtar began to pay more attention to defense. The palace guard was divided into two parts - internal, small, since by that time there were almost no criminals and ill-wishers on the Island, and external. On the coast, along the entire perimeter of the Island, a huge wall was erected, on which members of the Island's external guard squad kept watch around the clock. Zulu was appointed commander of this detachment, more numerous and trained. He had a much more important task than just guarding a

couple of halls in the castle. The detachment had to detect enemy ships in time and try to prevent the landing, or give a worthy rebuff.

The way the Island was located also helped in the fight against the enemy - it was surrounded by several ridges of rocks that barely protruded from the water. To get there without damaging the ships, you had to either know the right route or sail around to the southern part of the Island. It would be foolish not to take advantage of such a great advantage. Therefore, using the achievements of his son, Namtar built several light vessels and reached the underwater ridge of rocks on them. There, on his instructions, false beacons were erected, the sole purpose of which was to confuse the enemy by forcing his ships to run into the rocks. He could not put at risk his brainchild, what he had so long and carefully created. Therefore, he solved the issues of defending the Island with special diligence, ingenuity and even cruelty.

The system of false beacons showed itself perfectly - in the bay of the northern part of the Island, shipwrecks floated everywhere. Some of them were washed up in the shallows, and in that place huge masts protruded from the water and ragged sails fluttered. Over time, this place received the name - the Bay of Lost Ships.

The last line of defense of the Island was the castle itself. It was surrounded by an additional wall where it was required. Its newly erected parts now began with high steep walls overhanging the gorges. The fortress was impregnable, but if anyone managed to get into it by trickery, another surprise awaited him - a special security system that allowed him to block any doors and attack enemies from cover. It also included special lethal devices powered by the Mecha Tower. Their only purpose was to pierce or cut through the enemy. The inhabitants of the castle knew how to avoid these traps in case of anything.

The common inhabitants of the Island were afraid of enemies from the sea, but thanks to the efforts of Namtar and the detachment of external guards, they felt relatively safe. They had a lot to lose now, and so it wasn't your usual animal fear—they feared for their future. The future is exactly what Namtar gave them. Albeit strictly predetermined, until the last moment.

Chapter 13. Stranger

After spending enough time studying the Sands, I seem to be beginning to understand their nature. Not only their ability to see in advance all the destinies of the world, but also something more. The knowledge they give me and my people would take centuries, if not millennia! But they are available to us as in the palm of your hand – just reach for them with your consciousness – and they are yours. Hundreds of years, compressed into moments, together with grains of sand, light sparks in the darkness of the mind. And no language can contain such a body of knowledge (all my books are only a pitiful shadow of what I have actually seen) other than pure consciousness. A kind of language of meanings that is accessible to anyone whose mind is open to new knowledge. A language common to all people – my students will confirm every word I say, they all saw and felt the same thing as me. And any human mind is able to immerse itself in it, be imbued with it and even dissolve in it, comprehending all its secrets. I managed to lift the curtain between the ordinary world and the original truth.

Having understood this, I learned to read the minds of other people - those whose consciousness is also dissolved in the Sands. It was not a close study of someone's fate in the smallest detail, but a living process of observing someone else's mind. This was possible when a person was either unaware of it, or when he voluntarily opened his consciousness. And such mind-reading was possible simultaneously in both directions, which turned this process into a kind of dialogue in this strange language. My students and I managed to achieve some success in this matter, so much so that further study of the Sands turned into a joint immersion in this single consciousness, which is why new knowledge came to us, sometimes even faster. In addition, I was able to learn to hide some of my own thoughts by deliberately clouding or substituting them. It required a special concentration, it was really tiring, but at the same time extremely useful: I was not ready to share absolutely all my ideas and findings. It's not the right time, they need me yet—their faith isn't strong enough, they could easily go astray—I could see it in their thoughts.

Probably, the proximity of Peski once helped people build their consciousness, they gave them reason. After all, this element is a kind of materialization of thoughts, a bridge between pure consciousness and the ordinary world. They have a dual nature – they are quite real, they can be felt, but at the same time they open the way to another world. Now the myth of creation, which I partially saw in one of the books, seems to me to be complete. Water is the primary source of all existence, everything is generated by it. But

without intelligence, life would not be able to adapt to this world. This is the main merit of Peskov. Their voice called life from the depths. In addition, despite all their power and seeming chaoticness, they give everything a rather strict and orderly form, the changes of which are spelled out in the Destiny line. Everything becomes unambiguous and definite, but it will take a lifetime to see it. Even now I still do not see all the secrets and vicissitudes of my fate - I still have a lot to learn, putting my thoughts in order and forming my own mind like a tool.

Well, this world must experience a rebirth. And I am not alone, but all the people on the Island! Perhaps there is some way to establish a dialogue of consciousness between each of them, without going to the Abyss, without any rituals. After all, my main task is not even prosperity and prosperity, but something even more – knowledge. A new consciousness, thinking of a different level. People must open up to the truth, hear each other and nature, hear the Truth, the path to which I have only opened. You need to find a way to do this by fishing the Sands out of the Abyss. And it seems to me that giving things the power of Peski is the most correct and promising direction. What if you really gave everyone a medallion? And then there will be an opportunity to establish a dialogue with people and show them the way. But I still can't understand how the medallion works and how does it work? Maybe I should start with something simpler, I have a couple of ideas that are about to ripen in me.

Why didn't this rebirth happen earlier? What prevented the Sands from continuing to improve humans in the distant past? What if the creation of the world occurred not because of the interaction of the elements, but due to their confrontation with each other? And at some point, this confrontation suddenly gained strength again. But in addition to water and earth (which becomes sand when the water dries up completely), there is also fire and air. How is all this interconnected? It turns out that each of the elements has a will, like a man. And these primordial beings created us, and not some kind of Gods, as the ancients believed! They conveyed this will to people – it is we who are like them, and not they are like us! Sands have become the human mind, water is the very body of a person, through which blood runs. Are humans a battlefield for the elements? Now it is clear why a person does not have access to pure, absolute consciousness – the power of his mind is simply not enough, and most of his strength is spent on internal struggle.

Namtar's Journal, Entry 29

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The past did not greet the Prince very affectionately - with a kick to the face. That damn girl! She was waiting for him here! The blow was strong and sudden, the Prince recoiled and fell on his side, furiously pouring curses in the direction of the fleeing cloudy silhouette. Everything swam before my eyes, and I felt a little dizzy. The prince felt for the nearest wall and leaned against it. He needed a minute or two to come to his senses.

His thoughts were the first to become clear. He thought that he had successfully deprived the enemy of his weapon - he could be defeated by her sword - an excellent and extremely simple trap! Although is it simple? For her, it is possible. But the Prince was beginning to realize what had really happened – he had just traveled back in time! The hall in which he found himself was transformed almost beyond recognition. Before the break, it was a dilapidated place, with a partially collapsed ceiling, flooded with rainwater, overgrown with moss and some plants. And there is no hint of decoration - time has devoured everything. Now it was almost a solemn hall, although still quite small, bathed in the golden-yellow flame of candles, merging with the glow of the Sands. Canvases of red muslin hung from the walls in arches. The collapsed ceiling turned into an elegant dome vault, supported by columns framing the balcony, which towered in a semicircle above the portal. It was covered with curtains made of the same translucent material, slightly swaying in the light breeze. From the very entrance, almost to the place where the Prince was still sitting, a red carpet stretched. The stone from which the walls of the castle were built acquired a different color - it was difficult to say whether it was only because of the receding time or the lighting also did its job. The eye was pleasantly pleased with soft warm colors. The sand scattering everywhere added mystery and solemn beauty to this place. He is not subject to time, but it is subject to him! The castle was unrecognizable, transformed, with only faint outlines visible in these beautiful halls and neat walls. Now it was clearly warmer here, the wind did not blow through the holes in the roof, and the hall was quiet. Except that the arch that served as the entrance to the hall was still barely audibly running water, forming a solid transparent wall.

The next moment, when the feeling of delight let go of the Prince, he looked at this place a little differently. The way he always looks, soberly assessing the situation. Yes, he was not mistaken, he was really here. But when? The tongue did not turn to say "before". Although it was so for him - before. But he was in the past, which means that he was later. The prince stopped, it just didn't fit in his

head right away. So she whirled, and he went to the wall, leaned against it, and stood for another minute, catching his breath.

The prince looked around. There was no other way out of the hall than the one through which he had come here a few minutes ago. And this bastard ran away there! For sure, new traps await him, but most likely now she is his only chance to find something or find out something. He has already found the portal and traveled in time, which means that his chances of success have increased significantly.

Between the two thick square columns that jutted out of the walls, there was one arch on either side of the elongated hall, beyond which lay the darkness of a narrow corridor. The prince looked into one of them, and after walking a few steps, he found that a corridor led to a balcony that led to the exit from the other side. Now it was absolutely clear that there were no other ways. And the Prince, without further delay, ran away from the hall - the water enveloped him with coolness and restored freshness to his thoughts.

Now he was running along a narrow corridor, already familiar, but transformed, like the hall with the portal. Now there was no doubt - this was not a deception, not some trick or trick - this was the magic of the Sands in all its power. Familiar and even somewhat familiar, but it never ceased to amaze the Prince with its power. A force capable of overcoming any other element, reversing the flow of rivers, the growth of trees and the movement of the sun. A force that can take and save lives. His own life – what will happen to it? After all these years, he was closer than ever to his cherished goal, there was almost no doubt in his mind. Will he be able to save his life by changing his fate? The prince reluctantly remembered how many lives had been ruined because of his mistakes. He eventually managed to save many of them, but all those events inevitably left an imprint on his soul. It seemed to him that he was conducting a kind of bargaining with fate - dozens, hundreds of other people's lives in exchange for saving his own. Although, on the other hand, none of this seemed to have happened. Only he and the implacable guardian of time knew about everything.

The prince found himself in the next chamber, the one through which he had made his way with such difficulty on his way to the portal. The exit from the Watchtower was blocked by a door, and now it seems that it will not be possible to just break it with a shoulder. Obviously, the enemy is trying in every possible way to detain him, gaining time. But for what? Another trap? How did it happen that he was allowed to get so far? Apparently, he still managed to take the enemy by surprise. This girl thought that by sinking the ship, she managed to get rid of all its crew, including the Prince. But he disrupted all her plans. And the plans of the Empress, who sent a

warship to intercept and destroy the intruders. Did she know anything about his true purpose?

The prince, seeing no way out, was forced to stop. In the center of the hall there was a kind of huge bowl, over which the Sand swirled. The sight of her was very familiar to the Prince, and he did not even dare to approach her, remembering how it had turned out last time in Azad. If this is a trap, then the enemy greatly underestimates it!

He looked around. Above it, in several tiers, hung balconies. On one side of the hall was a blank wall, and the other was a wrought-iron lattice, planted too often to squeeze through. There was not a single mechanism around that would help him lift the massive door. The only possible way is up. Making sure that there was no obvious danger, the Prince approached one of the pillars supporting the second tier, wrapped his arms and legs around it, and began to climb up. It was not easy to do this at all - his sweaty palms glided over the smooth stone. After several unsuccessful attempts, the Prince decided to find another way. He regretted that he didn't have any rope at hand, which would have made it much easier to get somewhere.

Two square columns towered around the door, but their distinctive feature was that they were inclined and cut into the wall quite high, merging with it. The railing of the second tier was very close to this place.

Assessing the height and distance to the balcony, the Prince stepped back, wiped his hands on his clothes - it would be very unpleasant to fall from such a height because of slippery hands - and, running away, literally flew up the column. After taking five or six steps, feeling himself already being pulled back to the ground, he made a dash with the last of his strength, pushing both feet off the column, and jumped to the side.

This time everything went smoothly - the Prince grabbed the narrow railing with his hands, pulled himself up, threw his legs over and found himself on the second tier. Looking around, he saw a couple of closed doors. It was impossible to climb to the level above, although it seemed that one of the doors was open there. But the Prince's gaze fell on a pair of large window openings located on the sides of the main entrance. He could get there with another strong jump. Even more risky than the previous one. And though he had no time to doubt, he hesitated with it. The railing was too narrow. Several times he ran half-heartedly, put one foot on the edge, but did not jump. Each of the attempts further extinguished his confidence.

No, not that! We need to do it differently! The prince gave up his pathetic attempts and suddenly saw a long, narrow canvas fastened to a curtain on the side of the entrance through which he entered the

hall. The curtain was lying on two hooks sticking out of the wall, and it could be easily reached from the balcony on which he was now located. A new, much more reliable plan matured in his head.

He walked to the other side and pulled the curtain towards him. It seemed heavy enough, but it could still be held with one hand. The prince, as soon as he could, grabbed it with his other hand, pulled up the hanging canvas and carried it all to the window. He was going to throw the metal curtain through the window in such a way that it would fly through, turn around, and, thanks to the fact that it was wider than the window itself, it would be fixed on the other side. And the Prince will hang on the canvas of red fabric and climb into the opening.

And so he did. On the second attempt, he managed to throw the curtain through the window like a spear, after which he climbed over the railing and hung neatly on the fabric. He tried to climb as carefully as possible - the unreliable support could accidentally slip, and he would have to fall from a great height, which was clearly not part of his plans. But everything worked out and now he is already standing at the top.

For a second, the Prince was distracted by the view before him. Not only had the castle changed, but it seemed to be a different time of year. It was a hot, sunny day, which with its light turned the fortress from ominous and gloomy into a beautiful and even deceptively pleasant place.

Looking down, the Prince realized that he was lucky, and below him there was an outer balcony, to which he hurried down. He looked around again - on the rocks in the distance towered watchtowers, now intact, not destroyed. Below, the fast mountain river was still bubbling, and the bridge above it did not look like it was ready to collapse at any second. Behind a ridge of rocks, on his right hand towered a fortress. To get into it, he had to go down directly to the bridge. The height was not at all suitable for a jump, and the Prince decided to repeat his trick. He threaded a metal rod so that it held on to the outside of the balustrade that framed the balcony, threw the canvas over the railing, hung down on the other side, and descended as if on a rope. Hanging at the end, he made sure that the height was not dangerous, and unclenched his hands. As he landed, he immediately jumped to the side so that the curtain would not fall on his head. A moment later, a clang of metal was heard, but the Prince was no longer interested in it - he ran through the open doors to where the entrance to the fortress was supposed to be.

Full of determination, the Prince ran through the already familiar turn and ran out of other doors, still wide open. He walked a few steps and the entrance to the fortress appeared before him in all its glory and grandeur. Huge steps now blocked the entire path over

the abyss and ended only at the majestic massive arched doors. The fortress literally loomed over him, it seemed huge. Majestic and terrifying. Not everyone will be able to dare to just enter it. The walls burned with bright blood-red banners, on which was visible the symbol, the same one that had driven the Prince crazy for many years, driving away from his native land in search of answers. And now he could almost touch the secret, but he only had more questions with each step.

If it weren't for the sound of the river below and the measured crackle of torches nearby, there would be absolute silence around. For a moment, it seemed to him for a second that a shadow slid down from above. But there was not a soul around - his enemy was hiding. All this silence became even creepy. With all its appearance, the fortress made you numb with terror, and even the Prince succumbed to this influence for a few moments.

Overcoming his indecision, he began to climb the stairs slowly and carefully. He had no choice, and, therefore, he could only rush headlong towards his death in order to try at the very last moment somehow deceive her, dodge and save himself. Climbing up, the Prince found himself in a narrow corridor that probably ran along the very edge of the cliff - from the long, narrow windows he could see nothing but the sharp peaks in the distance and the water below.

After a few turns of the corridor (on the way he saw several closed doors that did not give way), the Prince saw a large elongated hall and he hurried there. Two rows of columns stretched along the entire hall, supporting massive vaults. Far ahead, the Prince saw two huge doors that seemed to be tightly closed, but even from here it was clear that they were decorated in a special way and led to some important place.

Suddenly he saw her ahead. A vile, hateful girl whom he wished for a speedy death. He rushed forward to her, suddenly hearing from her:

–Come on!

Somewhere upstairs (I think there was a balcony above the entrance to the hall) there was a creaking sound and the Prince, continuing to run, felt that something was wrong. And he was not mistaken. A wide log was flying at him from above! Someone at the top was holding it on two cables, causing it to fly in an arc, and at the lowest point it would hit the chest of the running Prince, taking his life or consciousness with a single blow, which would be equivalent in the end. In addition, the log was dotted with sharp spikes in several places, which further reduced the chances of survival.

The Prince remembered the next seconds as if in a fog. He managed, albeit somewhat clumsily, to fall to the ground, roll sideways, and thereby avoid colliding with a log. After it reached the

extreme point of flight, the log rushed back and flew over the Prince's head once more. Obsessed with the rage that swept over him, he jumped up from the floor, grabbed the log with both hands, and sprang forward with all his strength, pulling the cables and those holding them with him. Screams were heard from above, his enemies not expecting such a turn of events, and two or three figures flew down, desperately waving their arms.

Throwing away the log, the Prince rushed to the place where the figures fell. The same warriors, wearing strange turtle masks, whom he and his crew met at sea. Two of the fallen landed so badly that they seem to have died. The third, on the contrary, successfully rolled over and, without even losing his sword, rushed at the Prince. But it was too late for him - he did not hesitate to strike back and took his head off the shoulders of his opponent.

Meanwhile, the fourth, who managed to avoid falling altogether, ran down the stairs from the balcony. His orange eyes stared at the Prince, the blade gleaming viciously in the sun that broke through the long, tall windows at the top of the hall. The prince stood directly in front of the fleeing enemy and with all his appearance showed determination to meet the blow. But at the last moment, he swerved to the side and struck his opponent between the ribs with his sword. He was pulled sideways and, taking advantage of this, the Prince kicked him and pushed him into the abyss.

The hall had a very strange structure. The central part was paved with gray tiles, and there was nothing along the walls - two abysses at the edges of the hall! And so along the entire length. However, the Prince had neither time nor desire to examine the hall in detail - he ran after his main goal. And then something inexplicable and even frightening happened. The girl in black, turning away from the Prince, suddenly ran... right through the air! At the place where the abyss was, a barely distinguishable path of golden color appeared, which led a little upwards, into an opening in the wall. The prince was stunned and even stopped, refusing to believe his own eyes. Meanwhile, the stranger ran to the opening and the air path behind her began to melt. There was no way the prince could have kept up with her, even if he hadn't slowed down for a few moments. It seems that now he will not be able to catch up with her just like that. It was also unlikely that he would be able to jump to the opening - even if he successfully ran away (which was difficult to do in such a narrow place), there was almost no chance to grab even the very edge. And, besides, the opening was located above the level of the place where the Prince stood. Looking around, he saw that there were several such passages, along both walls and they were located at different levels, but mostly above him.

The girl looked at him, grinned, and disappeared behind the curtain. But the Prince was not going to give up and decided to try a desperate jump. He chose the closest of the openings and, after estimating the distance and height, the Prince decided that a jump was quite possible after all. He stepped back to the edge of another abyss and, lacking room for the usual run, tried to gain extra speed by jumping on the spot. And he ran. Another second and he will test his luck...

It is not known how much despair possessed the Prince at that moment, but he was determined to make this almost impossible leap. Fortunately for him, this was not destined to come true, because a familiar voice was suddenly heard from somewhere behind:

"No, stop!"

Had the Prince heard this a second later, he would not have been able to stop and would have flown towards his death - at the last second, desperately falling to the floor and trying to stop, he saw a barely noticeable glint in the cherished opening - it was sealed! And, even if he managed to fly, he would not be able to grab it and would simply fall off! Insidious, how insidious she is! You can't allow your rage and despair to be used against him. She will pay! She will pay for everything!

Stopping at the very edge and glancing into the abyss, the Prince threw away thoughts of the girl - now he was unlikely to be able to catch up with her - and turned. Opposite him, in the same opening, but on the other side of the hall, stood Haraz.

"Why are you here..." How did you end up here? The Prince asked in surprise, coming closer. He immediately added, "We thought you were dead!"

"I was washed ashore, right next to the fortress. There was no one around. I waited for a long time, looking for the others, but in the end I decided that I was the only one who survived, and decided to go inside. I wandered back and forth for a long time until I found a strange room. There was some kind of cloud of dust glowing in the center. Then I heard voices and hid. A squad of soldiers and this girl walked from the entrance and disappeared in this cloud. I waited for a while and then stepped after them. And he found himself here! Everything has changed so much," Haraz said briefly. – Is this exactly what you were talking about?

His eyes were burning, he didn't look frightened. Haraz has always been very good at controlling the situation or adapting to it. He knew how to use any circumstance as a kind of advantage.

"It's a real treasure!" He blurted out after him, without waiting for an answer. Delight took possession of him so much that he could not even restrain himself habitually. The Prince had never seen him like this before, and this made him a little wary.

"Welcome to the Island of Time!" The Prince said, grinning slightly. "Don't be surprised. It's a special place, but it seems I was wrong to drag you all to this island.

"I can't get over to you - the opening is closed, as well as the other on the contrary," Haraz replied, as if ignoring the Prince's last words.

"Thank you for stopping me in time. And it's good that you're alive. I thought the others were dead," the Prince replied.

"Help me find my way to you, we must achieve our goal together," said Haraz.

"I'm afraid you don't belong here... and now," said the Prince.

–What are you talking about? Haraz asked, surprised.

"I'm saying you need to get out of here and quickly. Those who survived the shipwreck remained on the shore and will soon set off on their return journey. We managed to find another ship. Our agreement was that they would wait a couple of days and sail back to Babylon. You'd better hurry back and find them and go back with them," the Prince explained.

"But don't you need my help?" We wanted to prevent the war, all these deaths," Haraz said, no longer too enthusiastic.

–No. I have to go alone. And I need to hurry! The Prince interrupted him.

"But you brought us here!" And now that we are so close to our goal," Haraz objected, speaking after the departing Prince.

The prince stopped, wanted to sigh and calm down, but instead he could not stand it anymore and broke down.

"Yes, damn it, I lied!" There's no purpose, you know? There is nothing but death here. Most likely, I will die here. But, this is only my way, none of you. You don't need to help me this time!

Haraz wanted to say something, but the Prince turned and ran away, leaving him alone again. The prince was confident in Haraz - he would cope, he was enterprising and quick-witted. And Haraz stood in the doorway for a while, seeing the Prince off with an angry look, and, turning around, walked in search of a way to his goal. The prince did not know that Haraz had heard all their conversation with Zoroaster and had far more plans than he had revealed. Well, if the Prince didn't want to help him, he could do it alone—not for the first time!

The Prince was very angry now. Both on yourself and on the circumstances. The wound above the eye began to hurt again, blood flowed again. As he ran, he wiped it with his sleeve and began to climb the stairs that led to the balcony - there was no other way. The front doors at the other end of the hall were closed. And from the balcony you could get into some kind of corridor that led to another part of the fortress. Perhaps he will even catch up with the stranger.

And she will answer for everything! In a fair fight, she would not be able to resist him, he would destroy her!

The anger that was seething in him now was even good for him. Without it, despair or confusion would take the place in his soul. He found himself alone in a hostile place, alone with his main enemy - the unknown. Who knows what would have happened then? But anger drove him forward. Through gloomy corridors and empty rooms. The prince found it a little strange that there was no one around, but he hardly paid attention to it. What awaits him? Another ambush? Another dastardly attack from around the corner?

The last thoughts sobered the Prince a little, returning him to caution. The meaningfulness of actions drove despair even further, gave way to hope. What will he do when he catches up with her? Will he just kill and that's it? Revenge? Or maybe we can get her to talk? Maybe then she would tell him something about the Sands and the Empress?

Meanwhile, the Prince realized that the corridors led him somewhere underground. Everywhere the Prince came up against closed doors and silence. He would inevitably have to go down, to where the coolness and dampness were blowing. The fortress did not give away its secrets just like that. And all this time, the Prince did not leave the feeling that he was being watched.

Candles stood in the niches of the corridors, into which sunlight no longer penetrated, and long beautiful carpets were stretched out in the large halls. A faint mist spread over the floor. Or rather, clouds of Sand, which glowed with a barely noticeable golden light. And everywhere hung red flags and banners with the same cursed symbol. How huge is this fortress? And what else lies in its depths?

It seemed to the prince that he was already close to something important, something was about to happen. And suddenly, after another turn, he found himself in a large, well-lit hall. The hall looked very solemn, it was arranged in such a way that a huge number of people could be accommodated in it, on different tiers. All of them could watch a procession solemnly marching through the hall. Perhaps it was a hall for some special ceremonies. On the opposite side of it was a huge door overhanging the open exit. On the sides of the hall, in several tiers, there were balconies, and the vaults were supported by rows of round columns, the pattern on which was twisted in a spiral. The prince had already begun to get used to the unusual architecture of the castle - all these multi-tiered balconies, strange holes in the floor and huge empty halls. It seems that the fortress was once intended for a much larger number of people. But now it was empty.

There was an unbearable silence all around, which was broken only by one thing - the Prince, descending underground, noticed that

everywhere, more and more often, jets of Sand poured directly from the walls and fell into the abyss, or spread like fog on the floor. Somewhere in the back of his mind there was a thought he didn't want to believe in: how could he defeat the Sands, prevent them from being created, when they were already everywhere? Maybe he got to the wrong time? What if the Sands were created even earlier? And now they are not only in the Hourglass, but throughout the fortress! The Prince's thoughts were sinking into darkness when suddenly he heard some movement from above.

"It's her! Now she can't hide!" thought the Prince.

The prince looked up, stepping back a few steps, trying to see whoever made the noise. And at the same time as he thought that it would be foolish of her to appear to him so simply, now that she had managed to escape with such grace, he saw a shadow appear from the darkness for a moment. A strange creature, a little human-like, looked at him with a pair of white eyes and immediately disappeared. Who was it? Definitely an enemy, the Prince thought. "Another terrible creature of the Sands, an inhabitant of this island."

But he did not want to understand all these issues now. He will never reach his goal if he tries to comprehend everything that is happening here. Perhaps the time will come when he will learn about everything, all the secrets and mysteries will be revealed to him by themselves. But now he just needs to cut his way forward as if he were still in the jungle.

The prince left the hall, and when he found himself in the next room, he suddenly heard some screams and sounds of struggle from above. Without a moment's hesitation, he ran up the stairs and saw his enemy, the girl in black, attacking another girl. Moreover, the second was unarmed. She tried to defend herself, but she had to move back towards the abyss, all three of them now standing on a circular platform that seemed to float above the abyss.

"Help me, quickly!" The defenseless girl shouted. She wore red robes, which were clearly not suitable for battle.

"The enemy of my enemy is my ally," the Prince thought. Once he was already convinced that this is not necessarily the case. But he could not allow a defenseless person to be killed. And he was unequivocally sure which of the two was definitely his enemy.

"Leave her alone!" The Prince shouted, seeing the girl in red, stumbling, hanging on the edge of the platform. "We're not done yet!"

The prince was here just in time. And his words had power - the girl in red had not been killed, at least not yet. Her enemy was ready to deal with her - one kick and she would fall into the abyss. But the Prince had already drawn his sword and was flying headlong at his opponent.

The girl in red found herself in an ambiguous position - she managed to feel the ledge with her foot, so she was not just hanging on the edge, but practically standing, holding on to the edge with her hands. Nothing threatened her life, but she could not get out on her own. But there was no one to help her at that moment - the Prince might have been happy to shake her hand, but he was busy with another problem.

His first attack was easily repulsed. An additional danger was created by the fact that the girl in black again had two swords, which she was excellent with. Apparently, this weapon was made specifically for her. At any moment, she could dodge and hit him with her other hand.

The prince struck one blow after another, but they were still easily repelled by it. He needed to find some advantage over the enemy. Perhaps it lay in the obvious superiority in physical strength. Or an unexpected blow, but it was too risky. At least for now, he didn't know his opponent well enough.

She was in no hurry to attack herself. When the Prince stopped attacking, they began to walk in circles, staring at each other with contemptuous glances. The girl continued to behave defiantly, beckoning the Prince with her hand every now and then. At some point, he could not stand it and, without coming up with anything, rushed to attack. She had been waiting for this, and her swords, her entire body, swirled in a whirlwind of death dance. Now the Prince was on the defensive, repelling her blows one by one. But among the flashing blades, the Prince did not notice how, gaining speed, she, after another turn, kicked him. And so much so that the Prince recoiled, quickly moving his legs so as not to fall. He was lucky - he rested his shoulder against the wall and resisted. But she was already running towards him, trying to take advantage of his unfortunate position. At that moment, the Prince suddenly had an idea - he turned around and, running up the wall, abruptly pushed back and flew over his opponent, doing a backflip. However, this did not confuse her - immediately after landing, the Prince ducked, and two blades whistled above him, with which the warrior girl struck sharply from the turn.

"Is that all you can do?" She said snidely suddenly. She was clearly trying to make the Prince lose his temper, to make his anger become his own enemy.

And it worked. The prince rushed at her again, and she playfully parried blow after blow. He stopped looking for ways to surpass the enemy - he fought furiously, losing self-control. And her appearance and words only provoked him even more. They penetrated his soul and mind like poison, poisoned them and turned the Prince into a beast.

But then he chose a good moment - when she herself seemed to be playing too much, and her attention was dulled a little, he grabbed her wrists (he had to throw down his sword), spread them apart and pressed her against the wall. His strength was enough to keep her in this position, safe for her, but a stalemate for both of them. The prince stared at her, squeezed her hands as hard as he could, and breathed heavily. But even this could not embarrass her. She saw his face, very close, felt his heat... And suddenly she laughed! This bastard is also laughing! It seems that she knows her worth!

The prince could not help it. He wanted unbearably to grab her throat and strangle her right on the spot. But he couldn't—it was too dangerous. The prince even wondered why she didn't kill him, since he was such an easy opponent for her. But this dangerous question gave rise to the right answer in him – it is only a pretense. He had already put her to flight once. And she still could not oppose him with anything really serious, except for her arrogance. She was only playing on his feelings! Realizing this, he squeezed her wrists with all his might, literally digging his fingers into them.

A grimace of pain ran across her face. Her smile changed to anger. And again there was silence in attempts to overpower each other. Suddenly, at some point, she stopped resisting and weakened her hands. The prince looked at her in surprise, and she raised her right eyebrow and spat in his face. The Prince did not expect this, it made him jump back, quickly grabbing the sword lying next to him. And she laughed again. Oh, how he hated her!

The prince wiped the spit from his face, but this time he did not give vent to his feelings. He calmly moved in the direction of the enemy and even seemed to embarrass her with this. The prince came close enough, but did not attack. He dodged one sword strike, then another, jumped behind her, out of her sight. After that, he made one or two turns with her in her futile attempts to land two quick successive blows with a swing. After confusing her, he pushed his opponent in the back, causing her to fall.

"Let him laugh now," thought the Prince triumphantly.

From the fall, the girl in black dropped one sword, and it flew in the direction where the other girl was still in a hopeless situation. The warrior girl stretched out her hand, trying to grab her sword, but suddenly the girl in red stretched out her hand, took the sword, and threw it far to the side. At that moment, horror ran across the face of the girl in black. Her gaze was full of fear and incomprehension. But only for a second. Now it was her turn to feel powerless, overwhelming anger. She didn't have time to do anything else - she had to hesitate just a moment and the Prince would kill her!

She jumped up from the floor and rolled to her feet, almost in the center of the platform on which their battle was fought. There

was doubt on her face, two emotions were fighting with each other. And this time she herself threw herself at the Prince. But now she was not so dangerous. They crossed swords, pushing each other with all their might. Now she had no advantage - the Prince was stronger and more resilient than her.

He looked into her eyes again. Nothing seemed to be able to shake that grin off her face. She made him angry, engendered anger in him, which gave him strength. He pressed on his sword, he saw that she was retreating despite desperate resistance. And she decided to jump abruptly to the side so that the Prince would fly forward by inertia. However, the Prince had been waiting for this. He caught the moment very accurately and remained firmly on his feet. Another blow of her sword followed. He bent down a little, missing the blow over his head, grabbed the girl by the arm, pulled her and threw her over him. She was able to hold the sword and, falling on her back, held it out in front of her, waiting for the Prince to strike from above. But, having assessed the situation in time, he acted differently. With a strong kick, he knocked the weapon out of her hands and, taking advantage of the confusion, plunged his sword into her stomach. She let out a short cry of pain, the last of her life, raised her hand helplessly, and died. Blood flowed from the huge wound. Person! She's not one of those sand monsters. Although I was hardly anything better than them.

The prince caught his breath for a few seconds and remembered the girl in trouble. He hurried to her, gave her his hand, and pulled her upstairs. Without saying a word, she shook herself off and walked away.

"Wait, where are you going?" The Prince asked.

"I have to go," the red-robed stranger answered him.

The prince felt this strange feeling again - he understood what the stranger was saying to him, but at the same time he heard words fly from her lips in a completely incomprehensible language.

"But I just saved your life!" Take the trouble to help me a little! The Prince exclaimed, either angrily or surprised.

The girl gave him a short, barely perceptible appraising look, grinned slightly, and turned her back on him. The prince looked after her in bewilderment. The stranger walked leisurely to the stairs. At first the prince thought it was some kind of invitation to follow her, but he dismissed the idea as untenable.

Suddenly she stopped. There was silence for a few seconds, the Prince only hearing his heavy, short-breathing breath - he had not yet recovered from the battle. He's already exhausted from the last couple of days, and then there's the battle with a remarkable opponent. And this stranger... Who is she? She is not his enemy, but she does not look like a friend yet.

Meanwhile, the girl took a deep breath, as if deciding to do something, and asked:

"What do you want in this place?" What do you want?

"I want to meet the Empress!" The Prince replied immediately. Hope for a successful outcome of this dialogue stirred in him again.

–Nonsense! Meet the Empress? It's impossible! Who do you think you are? The stranger answered him with a grin.

"I am the Prince of Persia, I have come from the future," the Prince answered her sharply, but was immediately interrupted by her words:

"Oh, I see. But the Empress does not accept anyone! Hear? Nobody! I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do to help you. Her will is the law, and to contradict her is suicide.

"It's very important, you're not a pony..." the Prince tried to object to her, but was cut off again in mid-sentence.

"You don't understand!" Today is a special day for her. And nothing could be more important than that! I...

And then something happened that puzzled the Prince. The Prince's recent enemy, the girl in black, suddenly stood up - the last time the Prince had seen such a thing was in Azad, when sand monsters did not die from ordinary weapons - and, raising her sword above her head, ran at the Prince. Her face was twisted with rage, and for some reason her eyes burned with a faint orange-red light. A second before the blow, she suddenly shouted:

"You can't change your fate!"

And immediately met her death, again. The prince, pushing aside the red-robed stranger and not having time to draw his sword, grabbed his opponent's second sword from the ground and, crouching slightly, jumped out, at the same time thrusting the sword into the enemy's stomach. The girl made a grunting sound and, being thrown into the air, flew in the opposite direction and fell to the ground. Her body began to eat something similar to Sand, but it looked somehow different. And the girl herself did not look like a sand monster at all. But this time there was no blood. It seemed that her body had become slightly transparent, small sparks were running through it. The skin began to shimmer with golden shades and emit some kind of mist. Then, suddenly, a yellow glow abruptly engulfed her entire body and something like an explosion occurred. A blinding flash and a thick cloud of Sand that covered everything around burst out. The prince heard the streams of Sand oozing from the walls rustle with triple force, as if fed by this cloud. The sand devoured the victim, absorbed his power. Or just take her back, because she was definitely a creature of the Sands, contrary to the Prince's recent delusion. They were like a monster with a hundred heads, ready to attack you at any moment. And if it is possible to cut off one of the

heads, then others will grow in its place. The sand will simply absorb the power of the fallen back into itself so that new ones will take their place.

But the Prince was preoccupied with other thoughts - how did his enemy know about his goal? None of his team knew about his true intentions until the last. The search that he had been conducting for years? It is unlikely that anyone attached much importance to this. People thought that he had gone mad, that he had left the city and become a hermit. But the popular rumor never brought to him rumors even remotely similar to his true motives. And old Zoroaster would hardly share it with anyone. Did she address him? But to whom, if not to him? It turns out that his enemy was not only powerful and insidious, but also omniscient, almost omnipresent! The prince vaguely remembered how the vizier had read his thoughts back in Azad. But then he could practically feel it. And this time - nothing. Perhaps the vizier was weak, but here on the Island he encountered those who truly knew how to handle the Sands.

Suddenly, the walls of the hall shook, there was a rumble and the clang of metal chains that held huge chandeliers under the ceiling. There was a frightened exclamation from the rescued girl, after which she grabbed the Prince's hand. The prince, immersed in thoughts of the incident, managed to forget about his new mysterious acquaintance for a second, but the noise around him and her touch brought him back to reality. And he instinctively perceived the touch even as hostile, but in time he realized that it was not a threat. The prince was used to trusting only himself over the years. He was indeed a hermit, a wanderer, seeking the truth and fleeing from death that followed him at his heels. And therefore he could not react in any other way to what had happened. The prince pulled the girl aside, looked intently into her eyes, but saw nothing special there. Meanwhile, the hum subsided - apparently, the Sands were satiated. It seemed that the whole fortress was some kind of living organism, soaked through and through with them.

"I am grateful to you, Prince. But you can't stay here! The Empress will kill you if she finds out of your presence. Therefore, I will help you with advice - leave the Island and never return here! The girl spoke again.

"Wherever I go, death awaits me everywhere. Only the Empress can help me! At any rate, it's worth trying," replied the Prince. He did not dare to voice his plan to the stranger in its entirety. He waited for her to say something to him. Intentionally or accidentally, he will give him something important about the Sands, the Empress, or the secrets of the Island. The main thing now is to try not to let her go as long as possible.

"The Empress is not disposed to communicate with the outside world and its strangers. For centuries, people from across the sea have tried to seize the Island of Time, subjugate it to their will or simply plunder it. And they all fell. What are you looking for here? What makes you different from everyone else?

"I did not come for wealth or fame. The only thing I want is to throw off the burden of the past. The mistakes I made in the past do not allow me to live normally. It seems that I am destined to die for my deeds. I seek only redemption. Perhaps I am the first of those who did not come here with weapons in their hands. Perhaps this will convince the Empress. But if I have to, I'm ready to fight and kill.

The girl did not answer. Stepping back, she silently looked at the Prince and thought about something. She looked around several times warily and even seemed to be listening to something. It was still quiet around and, despite the gloom of the hall, very calm.

"I'm afraid she doesn't care about other people's problems. Unwittingly, I stood in her way - and see what happened? Shadi, her obedient bloodhound, her personal thug, was sent to kill me. Right here, during a magical ritual.

"Shadi?" So that's her name? She knew somehow that I was heading for the Island, and she tried to stop me. And also not with words, but with power. She also wanted to kill me," the Prince said thoughtfully in response, and a little later added: "Does the Empress have anyone else to send on such a mission? Does Shadi do all the dirty work for her?

"Shadi has coped with almost impossible tasks many times. She earned the trust of the Empress like no other. It should have been a mere trifle for her to take away your and my lives. But this time everything turned out differently. And when she came here, I noticed that there was no usual arrogant grin on her face. She was very excited, almost frightened. She looked shabby and tired. If it were in full force, I would not avoid instant death. But it so happened that I was able to hold her back for a while, and then, by a happy coincidence, you came along. And after what you've done and said, I guess I should help you," the stranger replied in a long and frank speech.

"Yes, and perhaps something better than the advice to get away!" The Prince said enthusiastically, but with some resentment in his voice.

–You are right. But you really can't stay here, much less follow me. There are thousands of eyes and ears everywhere in the castle, literally every stone is in the service of the Empress. Nothing threatens me - she gave the task to kill me personally to Shadi and no one knows about it. For some time, my presence will be routine, and

the Empress must be too busy now to watch me in person. She's sure Shadi can do it," the girl began to say.

"So what do you suggest I do then?"

"You need to go to the throne room. I'll be there too, but we'll go our separate ways. You must operate secretly, so it is best for you to return to your own time, the present for you, and move around the Island in it. This will help me convince the Empress that I killed you and regain her favor. Maybe then I can help you too. Since she sent Shadi to kill you, it means that she was aware of your likely arrival and, apparently, is not very happy about it," the stranger finished explaining her plan. After that, she walked to the center of the circle in which they were standing, bent down and picked up something from the floor.

"Take this locket." It works like a key, you won't get far without it," the girl said, handing the Prince something small and round. "She won't need it anymore.

Only now, the Prince, looking at the locket, noticed a ring with a large red stone on the stranger's hand. But he could not attract his attention for a long time. Immediately after that, the Prince wanted to object or add something, but the stranger preceded him, saying:

"I'm sorry, Prince, but I have to go." We can no longer delay. Go too.

She turned around and walked quickly down the stairs. The prince stood and looked after her in slight bewilderment. He saw her go through the archway that served as the entrance to the hall, after which a massive door lowered behind her, blocking the exit.

Her words "no longer delay" swirled in his head, but his whole being, as if resisting them, forced him not to move and think about what had happened. Meanwhile, absolute silence reigned in the hall, permeated through and through with ominous mystery.

The prince had something to think about. He, after years of searching, finally got to the Island and, it seems, found himself in the thick of things. The Empress had declared a hunt for him – why was she filled with such hatred for him? Does she take him for another robber encroaching on the riches of the Island, or does the reason lie deeper? Could she know something about his goals? That's for sure. Shadi had been sent to kill him, her words still ringing in his head. Exactly what the old man had told him before the journey. What if Dahaka also acts on the orders of the Empress? Or maybe they have common goals?

The Prince's head was filled with more and more questions. There are more of them in one minute than in all these years. He decided to sit down on the steps, because he wasn't going to go anywhere in the next few minutes anyway. His gaze suddenly caught on a huge symbol on the wall above the entrance. It was a little

different from what was in the book, its elements were more elongated and sharp, but nothing more. The prince is incredibly close to him, and he still doesn't give him answers. The Prince had already studied the symbol well, leafing through the strange book that the vizier had dropped in Azad. The greatest sages of Babylon could not tell the Prince what this symbol meant. In Azad's richest library, there was not a single line about him. And there he was. The symbol of the Island of Time, which had stirred the Prince's imagination for years, was now everywhere, on the long red canvases that adorned the walls here and there. On the bas-reliefs of the walls, on the pedestal behind him, on closed doors and even in the most unexpected places. But at least now he could be sure of one thing - the book was really from this place, it was written by the hand of someone who lived or maybe lives here now. What if it was written by the Empress herself? Is it possible? Now it would be very useful for him to understand what it says.

The prince noticed how strange the word "now" had become. His time travel turned everything upside down. Now the past - how many years did the flywheel of time count in the opposite direction? – became real. And the present is the future. And he was going to change it, he had to, he had to! But so far, all his actions, including the victory over Shadi, are only a postponement, a postponement of the inevitable. Until he gets to the Empress and prevents her from creating the Sands of Time. Will his new acquaintance be able to help him with this? Can she be trusted at all? It seems that she does not say much.

The prince continued to peer at the symbol on the wall. Its two circles were combined with holes in the wall, from which, slightly gleaming, the sand oozed measuredly, falling into the abyss. Its streams seemed endless. An immense element that cannot be defeated. And a huge fortress to accommodate it, to absorb it entirely.

The prince continued to ask himself questions, and now he had decided on the central subject of his thoughts. His thoughts were most occupied with the stranger. What exactly happened between her and the Empress? Is her secrecy due to the fact that she does not trust the Prince? Even after he had saved her life, she had a hundred reasons for doing so. And if she did try to help him, how exactly? And what does he need to do to win her trust? Or is it better to trust only yourself, as always?

One. Alone again, in the middle of the emptiness of this hall and its oppressive, almost threatening silence. Face to face with fate, in a protracted battle that lasted half of his conscious life. The prince imagined himself standing face to face with an invisible enemy. Does he really exist and is it true that he is not able to change his fate, as

everyone around him tells him? Will he give up one day, experiencing deep disappointment and complete indifference? It was not the first time that all these thoughts had crossed the Prince's mind. He was endlessly tired of them, because they were like a vicious circle. A ring that could not be broken and that squeezed his mind like a noose. Over the years, despair had sunk into the Prince as deeply as the walls of this fortress had sunk into the rock.

From somewhere below, from a black abyss, a cold breath blew. The one that he remembered well and hated most of all - the proximity of the Sands, which burned from the outside and from the inside. Feeling that he was seized by immense anxiety, the Prince tried to switch back to thinking about the stranger's words. Inwardly, he agreed and admitted that there was a certain sense in her plan: it was indeed safer to move around the Island in the present time from which he had come. In addition, if he correctly understood how time and portals worked, then as soon as he was in the present, the past seemed to stop and nothing happened in him until he returned there. If he really has as little time as the stranger says, then in this way he will be able to gain a little and he will have a chance to make some valuable discovery. But what exactly can help him?

The prince began to feel the need to move on, in the fortress or in time, it didn't matter. Both paths were available to him. If the stranger told him to go to the present, then there was another time portal somewhere nearby. Most likely, there are many of them in the castle, the only question is how well it is hidden? The first time he was lucky - Shadi herself led him to the right place. Now he was left alone, and the way back was cut off.

"We need to look around," the Prince said aloud for some reason.

The hall in which he was located was quite unusual - there was no floor in it. Only a stone staircase overhanging the abyss that led to the platform on which he stood. It was round in shape, about twenty steps across. From its edges, stone teeth protruded like petals, and from them grooves ran to the center. In the center, they merged into a single recess. On the opposite side from the stairs there were a few more steps leading to a small balcony. On it, a couple of steps from the top step, there was a pedestal of a strange shape, from which, cutting the steps across, there was the widest gutter and merged with the rest in the center in the same way. The Prince had seen all this before, in one form or another, it was a place for some religious rituals. Perhaps some kind of altar, maybe even for a sacred sacrifice. Apparently, there was some kind of cult on this island based on interaction with the Sands. The prince had understood this before, but now he realized that he had not been associated with a gang of bandits, but with a religious order whose followers were hardly

inclined to abandon their faith. Perhaps the chances of convincing the Empress of anything are negligible. The prince will need arguments more convincing than words about his good intentions.

On both long sides of the hall, above the level where he stood, there were balconies pressed into the walls. Along the edge of each of them stretched a row of supporting columns, interspersed with a balustrade, and the balconies themselves ended in closed doors, behind one of which disappeared that strange dark figure that the Prince did not even have time to see.

The prince began to realize that it was time to look for a way out of this place. His new acquaintance could have been more helpful, for example, by taking the trouble to explain how this key medallion works. And, more importantly, the key to what? Where is the door for which it is intended? He turned it over in his hands - it had some kind of symbol on it, like a crescent moon, although, judging by the string on which the locket wore it, it was turned with its horns down. In the center of the crescent moon was a relief circle, exactly the same symbol he had seen in the book, on one of the last pages. The medallion itself was golden-bronze in color, and there was absolutely nothing interesting to see in it.

The prince re-tied the torn shoelace and put the key medallion around his neck. After that, he wandered in the only possible direction - in the direction of the pedestal, behind which rows of candles burned and some writing could be seen on the walls. Without understanding a word, he would have recognized them anywhere, without confusing them with anything else - they were the same in the book. But something else was shining ahead, not quite like a candle. The prince took another step and was dumbfounded. He literally couldn't move for a few seconds. Dagger! That very dagger, its incredibly familiar bluish-white glow - right here, in front of him! All the questions flew out of the Prince's mind, he forgot about the medallion and all the strange events of the last minutes. He almost rejoiced – such a find! Of course, he knew that the dagger must be somewhere on the Island, but to find it like this! He was lying right in front of him, unguarded, on a special stand in the form of two slingshots. The prince reached out to take it, but... I couldn't. His hand seemed to go through a dagger. He tried again and again, after which his exultation was replaced by impotent anger. Deception, illusion!

"Well, yes, of course! And I'm glad, you fool!" thought the Prince, stopping on the first step. It seems that his only chance is to cling to the help of his new acquaintance, whoever she is. It is not known how many more such deceptions are around. Maybe another time he would even face a death trap or worse!

But he could not just leave. Too many memories (not the best ones, at all) were associated with this dagger. I wonder how Maharadja managed to... "The prince is completely confused about time - to get a dagger? How did he manage to defeat or at least deceive the Empress?

Now, seeing the dagger in such a place, the Prince realized another thing - it seemed to be something more than a weapon (albeit a special one). More than the key to the Hourglass. The dagger is part of these mysterious religious or magical rites that took place in this hall. Ritual dagger for sacrifices. Everything he knew about the Sands before was just the tip, just a scrap. The mysteries that surrounded them were rooted in the soil of this island, growing out of the darkness of centuries. Now he could touch them, but he could not know and comprehend them. Ancient magic, practiced and developed for centuries by a secret order, isolated from the outside world. And it seemed to the Prince that he was drowning in this darkness. How a huge shapeless enemy towers in front of him, which is able to simply crush him. And...

A familiar chill ran down his arm. The same as from a dagger! The prince opened his eyes and saw the golden glow of the locket, which for some reason he was clutching with his free hand. What if the medallion has a power similar to dagger magic? Then it is clear how it can act as a key! The prince began to think that he began to understand something. He grabbed the locket again and, childishly inspired, tried to pull off the old trick - he began to remember the last few seconds, how he wandered along the sacrificial altar, looking around. But nothing happened.

The prince did not calm down and concentrated more and more on his memories. But no matter how hard he tried, time would not turn back. And again he felt a dark cloud gathering around him, which shackled his thoughts, pushing them in some direction. The prince resisted with all his might, so much so that he even staggered and almost fell. But he could not overcome this power. And then he decided to try something else, unexpectedly for himself and this strange mind-binding force. He suddenly stopped the flow of thoughts, his attempts, stopped mentally reaching for the past. And the darkness immediately parted. The force that held him back seemed to push him forward, and he saw himself, made up of millions of grains of sand, with a medallion in his hand in the center of the altar. This fictional Prince bent down and placed the locket in the center, in a small recess. Everything around him disappeared at once, and he only saw how the letters flashed in front of him in the darkness, and the door opened. He walked forward and found himself in a place he was already familiar with, right in front of the time portal, in which sand clouds were already beginning to swirl, and

sand streams flowed along the grooves on the floor, feeding the portal. But how could he be here, so far from the Watchtower?

The prince opened his eyes and suddenly realized that his vision was real. In reality, he was standing in front of a small sand whirlwind, in another room. He turned back and saw the pedestal on the other side, as well as part of the altar. The only thing that was not in his vision was that the entrance to this hall was separated by a wall of water flowing from somewhere in the arch that preceded the entrance.

The whole hall looked exactly like the first one where Shadi had disappeared from him in the flow of time. But the Prince clearly saw that there was an altar behind him, which meant that it was not the same place. So, that portal is really not the only one? And they all look almost the same. A special place, perhaps sacred, like a temple.

The prince stood in front of the time portal for a few seconds, collecting his thoughts. The locket helped him, though he couldn't figure out exactly how it happened. He was much luckier with the dagger, but the strength of the medallion was still inexplicable. However, the Prince did not want to go back in search of answers. In addition, it was unpleasant to be in the hall with the altar - this place for strange rituals was built in such a way that from any point of it you could clearly see what was happening in the center. The prince imagined rows of priests standing on the balconies and watching what was happening. And even though there was no one there right now, he instinctively (or maybe on the advice of a stranger) wanted to remain inconspicuous, to hide in the shadows. And without further hesitation, the Prince stepped into the sand cloud, which immediately picked him up and carried him through time.

Chapter 14. Guardian

A bold idea suddenly occurred to me: What if this consciousness is the same for all living beings? I went to the Sands alone, without my apprentices, but I took Jatta, who usually waited obediently for me at the stairs on the way to the Abyss. Without delay, I summoned the Sands, plunged into them with my consciousness and began to search. It took some time – the mind of a dog is not the same as the mind of a human. But I was sure that somewhere deep down it was built on the same principles, at least approximately. In order to find her in this other layer of reality, I did something familiar to the ordinary world: I called Jatta. Probably, she is not aware of her place in this life, and even more so in the subtle world of pure consciousness. But it certainly has some feelings, such as attachment – these are the ones that guide it, determining its behavior, goals and thoughts (or their likeness). And it worked! The bizarre, but already familiar world of the Sands changed for a moment: somewhere nearby, a bright white spot flashed, which immediately flared up, eclipsing everything. It would surely blind me if I saw it with my own eyes. But I continued to see rather with my mind. And that spot, which then diminished somewhat, was a flash of Jatta's consciousness, who seemed a little surprised. It consisted of a mixture of feelings and thoughts, albeit primitive, permeated with immeasurable goodness and joy. Her affection for me was a kind of landmark for her, in any space. She came up to me and licked my hand, ignoring the abyss under her paws. Now, despite her surprise, she also saw me with her mind. It can hardly be called dialogue, but Jatta listened to me attentively, waiting for what I would do or say next. I asked her to run in a circle. And her joy in response was something like "Yes, master!"

Then I tried to look at the world through her eyes. It was difficult to simplify my mind to the mind of a dog, but I realized that he can form his own opinion about the place in which he is, values his affection, and his sense of smell is much stronger than an ordinary human - he sees, hears and feels much more. And most importantly, her consciousness is open to new knowledge, to learning. Perhaps I will be able to change and improve even it!

I seemed to be even more delighted than Jatta. An accidental daring thought gave our friendship something special, turned out to be true. This discovery will undoubtedly be very useful, especially because it provides new, far-reaching possibilities, and I have only just begun to learn about them. It seems that I stop feeling like an ordinary person, in the usual sense of the word. I haven't taken that step yet, but I've already lifted my foot over the next step.

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The feeling that gripped the Prince when he was transported through time for the first time was the most vivid and unique. Now he felt more curious, and trembling admiration receded into the background. How does this portal work? Is it possible to control it somehow? Did Shadi herself open this window at one time or was she helped by the Empress? If Shadi is dead, and the Empress thinks that the Prince is dead, then he probably has a chance to go back to the past.

The prince took a step forward, away from the portal, and looked around - everything around him was again destroyed and long abandoned. Exactly the same as a couple of hours ago when he first entered the fortress. Who knew that such a thing was hidden in its vaults? The prince was still right in his guesses, but the past turned out to be hidden more securely. Secrets were in no hurry to reveal themselves, it was necessary to try hard so that the fortress at least began to reveal its secrets. Secrets that are more like a dream after which the Prince woke up. Now he stood in a gray, deep void, the silence of which was occasionally broken by the whistling of the wind overhead and the distant sounds of pouring water. But the dream was so... real, so alive! The only time something like this happened to him in Azad was when he stepped into a cloud of Sand and had a vision. He did not remember it at all, almost not a single detail - and this tormented him all these years. It seemed to him that there was something incredibly important about him, something that could greatly help him in his search. But in vain – not a single fragment of the vision ever visited him again. However, now, even though this cloud was very similar to the one from the Azad Palace, the Prince remembered everything in detail. He still felt the heat after the battle with Shadi, remembered her breathing. The prince touched his eyebrow - the wound from the blow of her sword remained in place. No, it couldn't have been a dream, it was all reality!

Suddenly he remembered that he was clutching a locket in his hand. Looking at him, the Prince suddenly felt that he looked painfully familiar. A very deep memory stirred in him - exactly the same one he had seen in Farah. It was obvious to him now where she had got him from. The prince hurried to push the memories away, something completely different was important now. He didn't understand how exactly he could use it and what else the medallion was capable of, although it was definitely from the distant past. It couldn't appear in his hand on its own. Now the Prince held this piece of the past in his hand, and the thoughts in his head were

intertwined as strangely as the streams of time in this place. His consciousness opened up to something incredible, immense and great. What power does it hold? The prince felt the possibilities before him, but he could not grasp the essence. He did not know what to do with these gifts in order to achieve his goal. He understood perfectly well what could attract the Indian Maharaja in this place. And what if, instead of looking for a ship, Haraz is blinded by the Sands and tries to take possession of them? The Prince himself had no illusions that the Sands of Time were evil, a terrible creature of this place, which could not bode well. Who created them, and what drove them?

However, the Prince was forced to use their power to try to change his fate. He was ready to do anything: run until his heart stopped, beat until his last breath and literally turn this place inside out, just to find his way. The one that will stop his endless running, wandering and fear. His goal was desirable and definite like nothing else – a person always clings to his life until the very last moment. It was not a question of heroism or honor, as in those cases when it is necessary to save other people's lives or glorify one's country with great deeds. All his other goals faded into the background. It was a ruthless fight with an animal named Death.

The realization of this made the silence around the Prince even more unbearable. Even if he wasn't in danger right now, he felt the need to run forward. Although, if he understood what was happening here correctly, the past would not advance for a second while he was here, in the present. And if he found another such portal (now he had no doubt that there were enough of them in this fortress), he would be transported to the past exactly at the moment at which he left it. However, it is unlikely that the Empress will wait for him with open arms and help him just like that.

The prince put the locket around his neck and walked out of the portal hall to the sacrificial altar. Or rather, to what it represented in the present: the ladder and the platform collapsed, part of the pedestal broke off and also disappeared into the abyss. The dagger was no longer there. Time devoured everything, but at the same time gave room for a new life - literally from the walls grew ornate trees, whose trunks and branches covered the walls of the hall with a thick cobweb. The prince looked around and found a point from which he could jump to one of the trees. And, if the ancient bricks did not look reliable, ready to crumble right under their feet at any second, then these trunks were clearly quite strong.

"One day," thought the Prince, "this place will be normal again, as it was before. Everything will become dilapidated and will be buried under dense thickets. No one will remember these places and what was here."

His only chance now was the words of the stranger he had saved. It was funny, because he didn't even know her name. Can she be trusted? This question tormented him incessantly. What kind of story happened between her and the Empress? Could it be that she is using the Prince for some of her own purposes? However, she helped him and managed to tell him a lot. He had at least some plan of action now, and all his thoughts were useless until he reached the throne room. It is important to remember only one of her most important tips - to stay in the shadows, to be quiet as the wind. And, if he still had to fight, then no one but him should survive. He only needs not to give away his presence in any way for the time being.

Running away and jumping onto a rather thick branch, the Prince pulled himself up, climbed onto the curved trunk of a tree and listened. He had to make quite a lot of noise, but then he moved very carefully. The silence around was still thick, and there was no sign of anyone's presence. After making sure of this, the Prince looked around and saw several gaps in the walls of the hall, most of which were unreachable. But fortunately for him, one of them led back to the ceremonial hall and was located to the right of the entrance, just above the place where the Prince was hanging. Deftly climbing from branch to branch, he quickly found himself in the right place. He had to make another, even more risky jump - from the tree to the edge of the ledge. But he, fortunately, turned out to be strong enough and the Prince climbed on it without any problems. He took a few steps and looked down - it was there that he met this strange creature. The prince did not have time to see it well, but the shape of its body resembled that of a man. A torso, two arms, two legs, and an average height like himself. There were some white marks on his dark body, even on his face. His step was quiet and hurried. But most of all I remember the unnaturally white, glowing eyes and black skin color, covered with some kind of haze. Perhaps something else was wrong, but he could not remember more - the appearance of this creature was too unexpected and short-lived. In any case, he did not want to meet him again.

This hall, like the previous one, was completely destroyed by time: the balcony on which the Prince stood was almost completely crumbling; Five of the eight columns in the center of the hall collapsed and lay on the floor in shapeless blocks, another fell on the balcony on the opposite side and also collapsed almost entirely. The exit that led back to the hall that the Prince mentally called the Central Hall was blocked. He will have to look for another, more difficult way. There is nothing permanent in this place, everything changes and transforms, which means that the Prince needs to adapt too.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew that fighting the Empress was a bad idea. Even if she is several hundred years old, as the legends say, and she is already very old, she must know everything in advance - every breath, every word, gesture or step. Perhaps he could just talk to her, but it was impossible to deceive her, at least for him. But his new acquaintance, it seems, knows something. What else could have angered the Empress so much that she had sent Shadi to kill her? She knows some trick, some way to deceive the Empress, hide the true timeline from her, or slightly distort it. In that case, he really should have found her quickly and won her favor!

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sound of someone's heavy footsteps. At first, the Prince thought that he had encountered the same creature again. But after a moment, fright flashed in his eyes and he suddenly realized who they really belonged to. The prince hurried to hide behind the nearest boulder, carefully peering through the crack. As his footsteps became clearer, he had no doubt that Dahaka had found him even here on the Island! Or rather, I haven't found it yet, but it's only a matter of time.

Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the hall, where the exit from the surviving part of the balcony was tightly sealed with bars, he appeared. The Guardian of Time who came for the Prince, who is naively trying to escape from his fate. Compared to a human, he seemed to be a real giant, a giant who was twice as tall as the Prince. His figure was somewhat reminiscent of a human - he walked on two legs, he had two arms, but his head was more like an animal's, with two large horns twisted in opposite directions. Also, the monster had almost no neck, and there were some growths on its back and arms. The power of the monster made an impression - a strong muscular body and shoulders of enormous width spoke of his incredible strength. His fists were the size of a human head, and it seemed that he could easily crush the head of anyone who stood in his way with this hand. The air around the monster trembled strangely, almost changing color. Even from a great distance, the Prince felt the scorching cold that the monster exuded. He himself was almost completely black, with a few white markings on his chest and arms.

Approaching the grate, Dahaka let out a menacing roar and knocked it out of the wall with one powerful blow, dropping it down. In addition to the grate, a dozen more bricks flew off the wall, which fell down with a terrible crash. After that, he carefully examined the hall. The prince knew why he was here and who he was looking for. And he waited with horror for the outcome of this meeting, fearing that the monster had a special sense of smell and was about to discover it. But it was incredibly dark in the hall - this place was located somewhere underground, perhaps very deep. After standing

for another ten seconds, Dahaka turned and walked away. Nothing betrayed the Prince.

The prince did not dare to leave his hiding place for a long time - it seemed to him that the monster could return at any moment. He always remembered that bottomless gaze, in which eternity froze. And he remembered perfectly well how quickly his eyes turned blood-red with rage, how his deadly tentacles rushed to the victim and quickly melted away all hopes of salvation. Time has given birth to a truly worthy guardian who does not care about human weapons - no matter whether they are swords or arrows. And the monster itself does not need it, because he himself is a weapon. Death in the flesh, for which almost any obstacle is not an obstacle. If something stood in his way, he destroyed it and moved forward. And it doesn't matter what it was - a simple grate or another person who decided to play with fate. Nothing and no one can resist such power.

The only bad thing about the situation was that the Prince's only possible path was through the place where the monster had just passed. One careless sound and it will give itself away. And then all the fury of fate will fall on him. Who is he to resist her? Darius died at the hands of a monster right in front of the Prince. Now, even though the monster had gone somewhere, the air was burning the Prince not only from the outside, but also from the inside. Cold terror crept into his throat and choked his breath. His mind was numb and refused to think rationally, giving way to some animal instincts. It seemed that the darkness exuding from the monster could even extinguish the sunlight. The already dilapidated hall was turning into yellow-gray dust before our eyes, and in the place where the monster had passed, even after ten minutes, black smoke was still swirling. It was a wonder how the Prince had ever managed to get this far!

He tried to keep his composure no matter what. Yes, his hands were shaking a little and he instinctively reached for the weapon, but his mind made him move forward. Death is not a threat that can be waited out.

The prince carefully walked along the long ledge that remained from the balcony, grabbed a long branch and carefully landed on the pile of stones that blocked the entrance to the hall. Why, it would take him forever to sort out this rubble! Descending the stones, he reached a pillar that had fallen on the wall and climbed, clinging to the deep cracks and recesses crumbled by time with his hands. He had to constantly peer into the darkness with all his might - the light practically did not penetrate here. When he reached the top of the column, the Prince realized that he would still have to take a risk and walk a couple dozen steps over the abyss, relying only on dilapidated brickwork. Having successfully crossed this area, the Prince stopped

at the edge of the breach made by the monster and listened. Somewhere in the distance, the wind howled again. And nothing else.

"Maybe this time he really left?" thought the Prince, realizing that he was deceiving himself.

But he had no choice. He poked his head out into the corridor that was located behind the connector. There was no one there, only a faint hum of emptiness in the distance. Semi-darkness enveloped everything around, as if evening was coming. The prince took a few steps down the corridor, in the direction opposite to the one in which the monster had gone. He kept looking back, but nothing was happening—it was empty. Ahead loomed a staircase on which daylight fell, which meant that the hall was not so deep underground. The prince reached the stairs, all this time almost pressing against the wall, as if he was trying to merge with it. In the niches near the staircase stood some statues of elders in long robes with hoods and folded palms. Sometime in the past, Sand poured through them. The channels through which it flowed pierced the walls of the fortress like veins through the human body. But that was in the past, and now it is only silence and desolation.

The prince climbed the stairs and found himself in another long corridor that stretched along one of the outer walls of the fortress. This was clear from the high windows, through which the gray and cold evening looked at the Prince. He, still trying to be as quiet as possible, hurried on. And suddenly, he began to realize that the turn ahead was not a step closer, no matter how fast he walked. Time seemed to stand still, the evening turned into a cold eternity, an emptiness full of despair. The Prince's eyes suddenly filled with understanding of what was happening. The air around him became viscous again, trembling, and everything around him - the walls, the statues - seemed to begin to lose their color. His understanding was replaced by fear, his heart clenched with a premonition of ferocious rage that was somewhere very close. Another second and the wall next to him shattered into pieces, and a monster burst out of the breach. Dahaka!

The prince jumped to the side, running his hands on the floor and trying to run. He had lost one of the swords, the same one he had taken from Shadi, whom he had killed. But now he was the victim. A real prey - the predator tracked him. Run! Run as fast as you can!

Dahaka rushed after the Prince. He did not move so fast, but rather his gait resembled a hurried step. But he was by no means so simple—he was not some clumsy giant. Time itself was subject to his power, he breathed the Sands and, walking along the corridor, he moved fragmentarily, moving forward several dozen steps at once. The prince, on the contrary, had a very hard time fleeing. The corridor never thought of ending, but now the Prince literally saw

with his own eyes how he stretched to infinity, pulling the nearest turn into a small point in the distance. He was beginning to realize that it was useless - Dahaka would catch up with him, tear him apart with his terrible tentacles and swallow him completely. As if it had never existed.

Fortunately, the Prince suddenly came across a small arch in the wall on his left, and he rushed into it. He came to a narrow spiral staircase leading up and began to run up it. This place was too narrow for Dahaki - the Prince had a chance to tear himself away from him! But one of the tentacles almost reached the Prince, he had to jump forward and fall on the steps, which caused him to hit his arms and chest hard. Part of the blow was absorbed by the Prince's chest armor, but he still let out a cry in pain. This sobered him up, he got up from his knees and rushed up the stairs with a vengeance. Soon he ran out through the same arch, into the same corridor, but a tier higher. He and Dahaka were separated by one turn in the corridor and a staircase - it was unlikely that the chase would end there and the monster would give up so easily. If time itself could not stop him, then the ladder was unlikely. For seven long years, he had been tracking the Prince, getting incredibly close to him from time to time. It was he who was the darkness in his dreams. And now Dahaka had caught up with him on this island, which was already obviously hostile towards the Prince.

All these thoughts flew through his head like a flash - he could not afford such a luxury - to waste time thinking. He rushed headlong to the exit to the balcony, which was another arch, but larger. Behind him, the Prince heard the same heavy footsteps and menacing growls. For a moment it seemed to him that he was making out something like words, but in any case he would not understand their meaning. A low, guttural voice shook the walls of the castle and echoed after the Prince, ahead of its master.

Discarding all thoughts, the Prince simply ran forward, away, not really understanding the road. He had nothing to think about, the rules of this game were very simple: run or die. He could only rely on his own strength, endurance and dexterity. In just a few moments, the beast behind him burst out of the hallway. He seemed to be even more furious. But instead of rushing after the Prince, he stopped for a moment, grabbed one of the fallen boulders, and, with the help of his hands and tentacles, threw it after the Prince. He ran without looking back and thinking about nothing but what lay ahead. But in vain, because this giant stone was not really intended for him. It whistled over his head and collapsed on the balcony floor twenty paces in front of the Prince. The impact of stone on stone turned out to be so strong that the ancient structure simply could not withstand it and crumbled down, depriving the Prince of the way forward. This

made him instantly rethink the situation. He realized that he had greatly underestimated Dahaka. This is not just a wild beast of incredible strength, not a stupid animal that you can just run away from, with the proper skill. This enemy was much more dangerous. He attacked in every possible way - force, cunning and endless tenacity. He was the living embodiment of the Sands, their very essence. He couldn't change his mind or give up. He did not know compassion, he was not capable of mercy. He could only become more ferocious and insidious, exhausting the victim to complete exhaustion.

The prince now understood that he could not rely on his own strength and dexterity alone. But he should not have forgotten about them either - there was an abyss in front of him, and he still had five steps left to run - and then what? He adjusted his trajectory a little and ran with all his might along the wall to his left. He took a few steps and, at the moment when gravity was about to pull him down into the arms of death, the Prince grabbed the bars on the window with one hand. After hanging for just a second, he swayed, and, feeling some ledge with his foot (he had no time to check its reliability), pushed off and jumped forward and a little to the side. To the high wall that connected the two neighboring towers of the castle. The strength of his jump was not enough, but in flight he grabbed the sword with his other hand and caught the hook at its end on a metal pin sticking out of the wall. Turning on it, the Prince fell on his back and lost concentration for a split second. As he fell, he let go of his sword from his hands, and it was falling on top of the Prince right now, spinning dangerously in the air. At the last moment, he dodged the blade, rolling awkwardly to the side, raised his sword, and ran in the only possible direction. Dahaka watched him expectantly from the very point from which he threw the boulder.

When he reached the end of the wall, the Prince found no entrance or door, and all he had to do was jump down to another balcony. Now there was an abyss between him and Dahaka, but it was unlikely that this would stop the pursuer. The prince stopped for a moment and looked around: it was dangerous to run forward, Dahaka could reach him with another stone and finally cut off the escape route. And it was impossible to get inside the castle - there was only one small hole in the entire wall, sealed with a metal lattice made of very thick rods. It seems that he is doomed. He was about to take the risk of continuing running, but suddenly something unexpected happened: everything around him trembled and blurred. For a split second, the Prince saw the past around him: the fortress had regained its fresh, majestic appearance, banners were hung everywhere and torches were burning. And there was no bars! But the vision immediately disappeared. Everything became old and

dilapidated again. But there was still no bars! Completely unaware of what was happening, the Prince decided that he would deal with it later, and dived into the now vacant opening. The wall in this place was very thick and could even hold Dahaku back. At least for a while. The latter instantly realized what exactly the Prince was doing, and, jumping high into the air, easily jumped over the abyss and landed behind him. Fortunately for the latter, he had already managed to sneak inside and run away to a safe distance so as not to be pulled back by the monster's tentacles.

From the heavy landing of the monster, part of the balcony in this place also collapsed down, and the beast hung at the opening with the help of powerful arms and tentacles. The prince took one last look into his eyes full of rage and hurried away before Dahaka found a way to follow him. He needs to try to run away from this place as far as possible.

Now the Prince understood that being in the present was completely unsafe for him. Dahaka found it even here on the Island. Now, while he is in this time, everything is the same - the Sands were created by the Empress, stolen by the Maharaja and discovered by the Prince in the palace of Azad. But none of this has happened in the past, and Dahaka will not chase the Prince if he returns there. Although it is unlikely that this time will be safe. It flows inexorably forward, changes everything, and with each grain of sand the fateful moment approaches, which many thousands of years before the birth of the Prince will determine his entire fate. He began to get the impression that he would have to raze this place to the ground in order to achieve his goal. Or at least get a chance to do so - an insurmountable block, a stronghold that blocked his way to a normal, quiet life. The one whose taste the Prince had long forgotten, losing himself in countless battles and endless roads. He was running away from this life all the time. He has always been his greatest enemy.

Making his way through an ancient, dilapidated corridor littered with some barrels and debris, the walls of which were overgrown with moss and some trees, and huge holes gaped in the walls and floor, here and there, the Prince suddenly saw familiar outlines around him. It seems that he has already been to this place! This is the same tower he went to when chasing Shadi and where he found the first of the portals.

–It's cool! The Prince said to himself, cheering up.

He turned into the first doorway and found himself on the third tier of a familiar hall. Wasting no time, the Prince hung from the ledge where the railing had crumbled and fell, and jumped down to find himself on the second tier, which was somewhat wider than the third. The further way down was also not particularly difficult - one of the pillars that supported the tier fell on the wall over the years - the

Prince took advantage of this and slid down, intending to go around the already familiar cliff. Now he was very close to his goal - he was determined to hide in the past and headed for the portal.

Dead silence reigned all around, and the darkness of the evening thickened more and more. A few steps later, the Prince heard the murmur of water. It is surprising how anything could have been preserved in these ruins? How many hundreds or thousands of years ago was this fortress built? Is it really resistant even to aging? Even time can't swallow up this place, at least not that simple. When he traveled through Persia, he found abandoned settlements, from the beginning of the desolation of which less than a hundred years had passed, and almost nothing remained of them. But this fortress could have survived much longer. And if there were settlers for this place now, they would be able to restore everything relatively easily and make this fortress suitable for life again. But now the sounds of water have become much more distinct - it is already close! The prince felt a surge of strength, and was about to rush there, but suddenly he heard the crack and crash of falling stones, turned back and saw Dahaka that he had found his way here through the roof of the tower. One jump and the massive beast is already behind the Prince, on the first tier. And now another boulder is already flying into it. Unable to run away from it, the Prince jumped sideways, and then ran to the boulder, jumped over it on the move and rushed to the saving portal. If only it was open, if only he could be in time!

Dahaka followed him on his heels. When he reached the block he had thrown, he scattered small fragments to the sides with one powerful blow. One of the stones hit the Prince's shoulder. He thought for a moment that it was a blow from the monster or one of its tentacles and repeated his trick - he jumped to the side, rolled over his head and ran on with all his might. But he did not calculate, and suddenly a wall rose in front of him. Time ate it up, it cracked, and part of the masonry bulged out. The prince took advantage of this, almost unconsciously, intuitively, ran diagonally over the bricks and, catching his balance, jumped to the right, into the arch with pouring water. In this fleeting moment of flight, the Prince's consciousness became cloudy and blurred. There were only a few steps left to the arch, but they stretched out into an infinitely long corridor, without doors or other passages. Only him, the empty infinity ahead and the cold merciless eternity behind. He seems to be squeezed between them, he is thinner than a hair, he is nobody. He has long been a dead man, the hero of sad legends about the inevitability of fate. It is lighter than air and more transparent than shadow. He himself is only a shadow of himself in the past. In a frenzy, the Prince closed his eyes for a second, and the corridor shrank back to its normal size, startling him with surprise. Why does

this happen? Is Dahaka the only one to blame for this, or is everything around him opposed to him, the fortress itself is ready to stretch and shrink, just to drive him to madness and push him into the abyss of death?

Having landed, the Prince again could not cope with the inertia and ran on all fours for a couple of seconds. He would have fallen, but having rolled over his head in time, he still kept his balance. The cold water washed a pleasant coolness over his body and cheered him up a little.

The portal is closed! It is doomed, because this place is a dead end! Dahaka was already five or six paces behind him... And so, the monster, slowing down for just a moment, releases its tentacles at the Prince. He won't have time to jump away. His body does not obey him. He doesn't feel anything at all, just the slow breath of time. The moment that separated the Prince from the embrace of death froze and stretched into minutes, hours, years. It was no different from the previous seven years of constant searching and running. Dahaka is still breathing down his neck, constantly in the crosshairs of his menacing blow, though he runs so that his soul is ready to break out of him and be left behind. Perhaps it had already left him, and had long since vanished in that blind rage that it was so strong that it took hold of him. Along with the cold, it climbed under the skin and pierced the heart with black needles. It shook the walls and poisoned the air, sometimes as if compressing it into a point or, on the contrary, stretching it into a bottomless abyss. And, one way or another, the Prince fell into it, deeper and deeper, sometimes slowly and viscously, and sometimes quickly and inexorably. The mere presence of the beast could destroy it, grind it into powder, turn it into a pile of stones scattered on the floor. The man in it was dismantled to the bone, there was almost nothing human left in him at all. The prince was beginning to think that he saw the world through the eyes of his executioner, he laughed at himself and his vain attempts. He already wished for his imminent death, the time loop that he had created was now tightening around his neck more and more. He created this monster himself, he...

It was not known how much darker the Prince's thoughts might have become if the beast had not suddenly howled and stepped back. Its tentacles, as soon as they touched the water that flowed down the arch in a dense wall, jerked back and Dahaka let out a heartbreaking scream. It could only mean one thing - this monster still feels pain, and it cannot overcome the water barrier. But fear was unknown to him, and several furious blows followed against the wall around the arch. However, the wall in this place was incredibly thick and did not succumb even to such power. A few stones, after a moment, flew at the Prince, but he had already managed to recover and hide behind

the nearest column. These throws were just a desperate attempt by the beast to do something in such a losing situation. But now the monster's attempts were in vain. And, judging by the color of his eyes, which instantly changed from red to cold white, the beast realized everything and only at the end measured the Prince with a malicious, piercing gaze. And it was even more terrible than his anger - it literally shone through him, promising him cruel reprisals the next time they met. And after another moment, the beast disappeared, the air returned to its normal hue, and the Prince's consciousness began to return to him. His frenzied thoughts began to slowly take their place in his head, his breathing evened out and the feeling of pain returned - the blow of a stone to his left shoulder did not go completely unnoticed.

But it seems that the Prince never fully became himself again. How many times has he lost a piece of his soul when he falls into this abyss? Now, placing the medallion in the center of the recess in the portal, into which the Sand that came from nowhere began to slowly flow along spiraling grooves, the Prince was transported back in time, back to the past. He didn't believe that Dahaka had left yet and was in a hurry - he had simply broken the rope on which the locket hung before using it. His life is so intricately woven into this web that he cannot escape without harming himself. A part of his soul still lived somewhere in that time and place where the young fool dreamed only of honor and glory, wishing to attack the palace of the Maharaja as soon as possible and show himself in battle. The other was somewhere out there, at an unknown point in space, where only one thing mattered - Farah was next to him. She loves him and trusts him no matter what. But the Prince forgot her, resigned himself to this bitter loss, as if she really died. And another part of him is that he is always wandering in search of deliverance from a heavy load. But another part, tormented and somewhat indifferent to everything, cruel and with a consciousness reminiscent of a moonless night covered with clouds. One in which only darker ones coexist with dark spots. Fragments of his soul were scattered all over these places and hundreds of others that he visited. How to find and collect them all? And return them to their place so that they are again part of something whole. Something whole, real and alive. The path of his life was so ornate that it was constantly braided into knots and loops and resembled rather some kind of dream. A dream that is eternally long and at the cost of his life.

The prince walked forward a few steps and found himself in front of a wall of water. He stretched out his hands and felt a refreshing coolness. He washed his face and quenched his thirst, and only then did he suddenly realize that the reality around him had changed. The castle around him blossomed again like a spring

garden, demonstrating its austere splendor in every possible way. It seems that these journeys are not in vain for him and his consciousness lags behind his body. It does not immediately accept the changes that have taken place, and for some time even resists them, but now that it has begun to return to normal, the Prince tried to focus on more rational thoughts. First, he managed to sneak away from Dahaki and at the same time learned at least one of his vulnerabilities. This can be very useful in the future. Secondly, he went back in time and did not intend to go back yet. However, if he still has to, in addition to important knowledge, he also has an important skill - he can independently control the portal and push the boundaries of time. Now he understood what the stranger meant when she said that the locket was something like a key. He studied it carefully once more, but finding nothing remarkable or new, he tied the broken ends of the rope in a knot and put the locket back around his neck, hiding it, just in case, under his clothes. A valuable thing, it will clearly be useful to him, although he may not be aware of all its capabilities. The path ahead was familiar to him, and he confidently moved forward, towards a hall with many tiers, the first of which, apparently, was a training room for the Empress's soldiers. The Watchtower was evidently adjacent to the soldiers' barracks. Now all he has to do is get to the entrance to the fortress and somehow get into the throne room.

The prince ran into the familiar hall and saw an open door in the distance. He was happy to have such a shortcut—he wouldn't have to climb up and do all those tricks with the cloth. Moreover, it was where he left it - outside. The prince immediately hurried to take advantage of such luck and rushed to the exit.

His despair receded. Perhaps Dahaki's close presence had such an effect on him, devouring him from within. But his soul, his hope, was like a fortress – dilapidated ruins that suddenly turned into something beautiful. A damp evening gave way to a warm, sunny day, and the Prince again found the strength to run to his goal without even seeing it. And completely unaware of what it could look like at all. At such moments, he firmly decided for himself that he had to go to the end. Any mood swings, bouts of despair will recede one day, you just need to keep walking. Or even flee. If he has the strength, he will go through all the corridors of this place, look into every corner, break through any wall and overcome any abyss. The heart of a warrior was beating in him, and it was not appropriate for him to give up and give up.

When the Prince was about to reach the exit, he suddenly heard soft, fast footsteps, the sound of which even seemed familiar to him. He looked to his left, and instead of a solid wall, there was a grate along the hall, with a tall door in the center, which seemed to be

locked. This lattice separated the hall from a longitudinal corridor with narrow high windows, along which, moving from running to stepping, walked the same creature that he had seen shortly before meeting the stranger.

"What kind of creature is this?" thought the Prince, peering into his absolutely white eyes, slightly glowing in the shadows of the corridor. And then it occurred to him that the more appropriate word he should call him would be "Being." It looked like a dead man walking, the white markings on its face like a skull, as if its skin was so thin that you could see the bone. Perhaps this is what the sand monster looks like before its demise. The one who lived a long life, but did not fall in battle. But you can hardly call it real life - the mind, captivated by the Sands, dissolved in the furious element, which finally erased from him all traces of who he once was. The creature did not look exhausted, but rather worried. It was also staring at the Prince, who had decided that if he had to face him, he would kill him. Firstly, out of a sense of pity, and secondly, for reasons of safety. What if, like a wounded animal, he clung to his last moments even more fiercely than usual?

The silent scene lasted only a few seconds, but the image of the Thing was firmly imprinted in the Prince's memory. His black skin looked like it had been burned, and some kind of smoke or ash swirled around him. It was as if particles of his skin were moving, now swaying as if in the wind, now separating from him, flying through the air and growing back into him. And when it continued its run, a thin, barely distinguishable plume was visible behind it for a couple of moments, which seemed to repeat its movements.

The prince remained standing. He thought about how hostile this place was. And not even to him, but to any life in general. An oasis of death that lures travelers from afar, and then grinds them into endless Sand, which permeates everything here. This place is full of surprises. Unpleasant, painful surprises.

This meeting once again reminded the Prince of reasonable caution. He began to think that danger could come from anywhere - literally the walls could come to life and attack him! He would probably not have been surprised at anything. When the Prince stepped out onto the bridge that connected the Watchtower to the entrance to the fortress, he found that the blood-red banner he had left earlier lay on the ground, and birds were circling in the air. The prince immediately noticed their yellow eyes, poisoned by the Sands, and their angry shouts. In themselves, they were small and did not pose any danger - they were no match for those monstrous birds from Azad, but the point was different. Nature itself gave way to the Sands, succumbed to their pernicious influence and behaved extremely unfriendly. And suddenly, as if echoing all the Prince's

expectations and fears, the birds swirled somewhere above his head. As they accelerated and their numbers increased, a golden veil formed around this living vortex, which slowly, along with the flock, descended to the ground. The prince took a couple of steps back and prepared for a fight. He felt a little confused—he hadn't expected the resistance to be so ubiquitous and the transformations so bizarre. In front of him, another spawn of the Sands appeared, literally born from a whirlwind of birds. It was dressed in a bluish-black wide-brimmed cloak. His face was almost completely hidden by a mask, only a sharp nose and bright yellow eyes were visible. The hem of the cloak seemed to flutter in the wind - it was cut into separate stripes resembling bird feathers, and created the illusion that its owner was floating in the air. In a hand whose fingers were more like claws, this strange bird-man clutched a delicate long sword, but he did not move. It seemed that he was waiting for the Prince to come up to him himself, as if kindly inviting him to a duel.

After assessing the situation, the Prince decided to act. The place in which the monster hovered had a round shape - the bridge widened and looked like a small arena. Perhaps the Prince will be able to throw him into the abyss, since, apparently, the monster did not really know how to fly. The prince began with a short series of powerful and quick blows to the body, but each of them was easily blocked or simply parried by the strange creature. Then he made a quick roll to the side and immediately struck a strong blow to the monster's legs. But his sword only sliced through the air! The prince realized that he had never faced such an opponent before - it was easier for him to understand what was happening before. Now the local realities forced us to reach a new level. Everything here looked like closed doors to which you need to pick up the key. Each time a new one.

Raising his sword above his head, the Prince rushed at the monster, trying to deceive him. As soon as he blocked the Prince's blow, he threw the enemy's sword down with a sharp movement, grabbed him by the left shoulder and, pushing off the monster's hand with his foot, swung over him with one light jump, about to deliver a powerful blow to the back. But even before his sword touched the monster, the monster suddenly changed its color to golden sand. The same golden haze enveloped him, and he literally disappeared into thin air, causing the Prince's blow to hit the stone from which the bridge was made. The monster is gone! What is this? A dummy, a trick? Illusion? It seems that this place is beginning to drive him crazy, destroying his sanity. This probably also explained his constant mood swings, fits of fear and sudden enthusiasm. This lock squeezes all the juice out of him, emotionally and physically drains him by all possible means. What if the whole place is a mirage? The dream he

has lying on the sandy shore? Or even visions after death, which never gave him peace?

Looking somewhere into the distance, the Prince suddenly saw the Creature again. It stood opposite him, on the same bridge, but there was a bottomless abyss between them, though not too wide at this point. He had an axe in his hand, which he suddenly raised and threw directly at the Prince with a sharp movement. He dodged, but only by a miracle - his reflexes worked, and he himself was still captive to his thoughts. However, this incident immediately brought him to his senses. Remembering his decision regarding the Creature and indignant at such audacity, the Prince could only shout angrily:

–Hey you!

But the fleeing Creature did not even think of turning around or answering in any way. The prince was very eager to follow him, but it was not possible to get to the next bridge. There was not a single passage except the locked doors. And then it occurred to him that this was for the best, for this pursuit did not bode well and only distracted him from his main goal. Another illusion!

Now the Prince felt that he had found, in some way, the answer to the question that had been latent in him for a long time - why did not the powerful Empress unleash all her power on him, send hundreds of soldiers against him to finish him off? She just didn't need it! She gave him a little test that provoked him and dragged him into the thick of things. And now he is captive to this place and, it seems, to his own mind. The borders of this time are reliably guarded by a formidable guardian - he has no chance to get out. What does she want? It seems that the stranger failed to convince the Empress that the Prince was dead. Is she alive herself? And wasn't it also just an illusion?

The prince hurried to the majestic staircase leading to the fortress. Now he was no longer concerned with questions of secrecy and silence. After a couple of minutes, he found himself back in the Central Hall, at the far end of which there were huge doors that most likely led to the throne room. But this time they were open. The Empress seemed to be inviting him to visit. Well, it was still his only chance.

When the Prince had already crossed more than half of the hall, he suddenly heard a call. A familiar voice!

"My Prince, you are alive!" Wait up! Haraz shouted. He was standing in the same opening as when they had last met.

"Why are you still here?" Did you manage to find anyone from the team? The Prince asked, puzzled, pausing. He sensed something was wrong.

"I'm alone here!" I washed ashore and made my way here. Secretly, past a platoon of soldiers who appeared out of nowhere.

And then there was this place and I got to... to the past? Haraz muttered in confusion. He spoke as if his first meeting with the Prince had never happened.

"I told you to find the others and go with them on a ship away from here!" The Prince replied, but rather only to make sure that there was something wrong with Haraz.

–We are... You..." he babbled even more confused.

This was not the Haraz the Prince knew. Not the handsome man with the cunning and penetrating gaze he had seen many times in the palace. And not even the one he met in this place last time. Now he only silently felt the invisible wall in front of him and looked at the Prince imploringly.

What happened to him? A lost, lost soul that seems to be about to lose its mind. He didn't remember their first meeting, and he wouldn't remember this one either. How long did he spend here? His appearance betrayed endless, immeasurable fatigue, hundreds of years without sleep and rest - only constant, non-stop running in a vicious circle. Another of the countless traps - and another victim of the insidious Empress falls into it. Haraz standing in front of him was like a mirror image of the Prince himself in time - a little more and he himself would begin to go mad, confused and lost in the web of time and space, forget himself and everything that had happened. And then the Prince suddenly thought about the rest of the ship's crew - what if something similar happened to them? This place, like a whirlpool, draws them all into the abyss of madness...

–Beware! Haraz suddenly exclaimed in his almost normal voice, pointing behind the Prince's back. He grabbed his sword and turned around, expecting to see Her. However, another unpleasant surprise awaited him. In front of him, literally ten steps away, still grinning, stood Shadi. With one hand she held her sword (the one that remained beside her body) resting it on her shoulder, the other resting on the withers of a huge stone dog, like the ones the Prince and the crew had met in the jungle. The second obediently sat on her right.

"Only this was not enough!" - the Prince only managed to think.

–Forward! Shadi barked at her faithful dogs. She clearly had some kind of power over these beasts.

The prince was at a disadvantage – he had nowhere to run and there was no way to avoid the fight. And his opponents were incredibly strong and ferocious - most likely, he would have a hard time. But he still held on to the idea of "never give up and do not despair" and grinned in response.

"Was one time not enough for you?" Oh, maybe you want to get that back, too? The Prince said, touching the locket that once belonged to Shadi.

"Give it back to me!" And yet... I'll come back for it later! She said snidely and hurried to leave the door of the throne room, pointedly and contemptuously waving her left hand at parting, already with her back to the Prince.

The Prince had no time to wonder what was happening, that she had somehow survived. Or did the Empress resurrect her? What's the point of fighting an immortal enemy then? Maybe a dagger would help him? "He will be able to think about all these questions only if he stays alive.

A head-on encounter with such a formidable opponent as these dogs left the Prince no chance at all. His memory was still fresh from his previous encounter with them, and he did not dare to attack. Instead, he ran away and swung over them with a side somersault. But such a trick is unlikely to mislead the animal - their reaction is much faster than that of humans. Crushing the stone floor with their sharp claws, the dogs turned and rushed at the Prince again.

And then he suddenly felt that he could not move. And his death is running straight at him at great speed. Another moment and... But the strangeness did not end there. The prince saw himself, as if coming out of his body and fighting with angry animals. I saw how he died and was replaced by a second, a third, and so on. Everything that happened seemed to move away from him, ceased to seem real, as if he saw some other layers of reality, in which he did not exist, but only his endless futile attempts. And in the reality where he is, still in a daze, there were no dogs at all. And somehow he saw all the layers at the same time, at once, from all angles, from the perspective of each of the Princes, and he didn't know exactly which one he was. Which of them is real. Had he made the wrong choice, he could have remained forever captive to these illusions, eventually turning into something like Haraz, who sat helplessly at the edge of the abyss, staring into the distance with glassy eyes, forgetting himself. The sands defeated him. Fascinated and destroyed.

The prince felt that the door was closed in front of him again. Although the way to the throne room was completely free. It turned out that the key was needed even for open doors. Or maybe, on the contrary, he should lock something, seal something?

The prince stepped back, clutching the locket. If this is a key, does it mean that it should work in the opposite direction? He, the one, the real and only one, wanted to close himself off from the illusions swarming around him. All his other copies were too busy fighting the dogs to hold on to the locket, and he could. He was like a landmark in this chaos, like a talisman that protected the Prince. After all, it was no coincidence that Shadi wanted to get him back, even if she was also just a mirage - now the Prince understood this. This medallion must be a very valuable thing. And the harder the

Prince squeezed it in his hand, the more all the other copies of him faded.

Passing through the huge doors leading to the throne room, he decided to completely fence himself off from the madness that had taken place a few minutes ago and cut the rope holding the counterweight of the door with his sword. Now there are only two left: him and the Empress with her tricks. It is a pity that the stranger who helped him is most likely no longer alive. His only hope now was the locket, which he hastened to hide as soon as the visions subsided. The Empress must not know that he is with the Prince.

Passing arch after arch, a series of which led to a wide staircase in the distance, the Prince glanced around - yes, he was in the same place. This is the Empress's chambers, decorated with majestic statues of strange beasts, which he had never seen in his life. An endless red carpet with golden flecks stretched across the floor, translucent canvases swayed overhead, carved columns propped up massive vaults, and the air was filled with a golden sheen. The hall breathed freshness and its magnificent decoration spoke of the peculiarity of this place. The prince was mentally preparing for battle - he had no choice. And suddenly he made out a familiar silhouette in the distance - an Hourglass!

It became difficult for him to restrain himself, the flow of thoughts and feelings, which came from nowhere, literally overwhelmed him. The prince fled, partly forgetting about circumspection and caution. It is difficult to say what exactly pulled him forward, because his last meeting with this Clock did not end well. What can he do now, if he doesn't even have...

"A dagger!" the Prince exclaimed in his mind, seeing a familiar outline on the ledge hanging over the Clock.

And immediately his ardor cooled down - his mind returned to him. The dagger he saw on the altar was a decoy, a dummy. Why should this be real, lying like this, so simply, without any guard? There was not a soul around the Prince. No one sought to attack him or talk to him. The Hourglass was empty, looking exactly as the Prince had remembered it, but without its contents. But they were quite real - the Prince touched the glass and unpleasant memories surfaced in his memory. However, their emptiness gave him hope:

"It's not too late!" thought the Prince. "This is the same Clock, but without the Sand inside. I still have time to stop the Empress!"

The prince climbed the forked staircase, at the base of which stood the Clock, and approached the dagger. He was lying on a stand very similar to the one the Prince had seen at the altar. He knew how his attempt would end, but he still had to try. The prince stretched out his hand and prepared for it to go through. But it did not pass, he felt the object. He raised the dagger in his hand in surprise and

examined it. And with even greater surprise, the Prince found that the dagger, despite the fact that he had just taken it, was lying on a stand as if nothing had happened. And as soon as the dagger that was in his hand disappeared from sight - the Prince looked away for just a second - it disappeared from his hand! The prince repeated his actions several more times, each of which the illusory dagger appeared in his hand and immediately disappeared - it was enough to blink. He just couldn't do anything about it.

Puzzled, the Prince looked around. In the distance, on a dais, stood the throne of the Empress, and over it hung the heads of some birds. But there was no one around. What does all this mean? Where is Shadi, where is the Empress herself?

–Help me! The stranger's voice rang out.

The Prince turned to the voice, where no one had been a moment before, and saw a girl in a red dress being forcibly dragged by the arms of two very strange-looking creatures, similar to the one the Prince had met on the bridge at the Watchtower. But there were no birds around, they appeared out of nowhere, and their robes were red and slightly different - they wore armor that covered their chest and shoulders. His face was also hidden under the mask, and sharp metal spikes protruded from behind his back. Each of them had a long, elegant sword tightly clenched in his hand, and it seemed that they were always ready for battle.

She sat on the throne. The Empress herself. The prince was just about to say something, but she made a gesture to be silent. And then she began to speak herself, and she spoke Persian, which surprised the Prince a lot. Her voice was so powerful that the walls around her shook. The prince did not see her face - she sat in the distance, in the shadow of the canopy, dressed in a long, loose robe with a hood. And only her eyes burned in the semi-darkness with red lights, inspiring, if not fear, then at least awe.

"I'm not here. I am nowhere and everywhere at the same time. And you only see what I will let you! She said, then waved her hand as if calling someone or something to her. And the guards leading the captive stranger first slowed their pace, and then went back - the Empress turned back time with one movement of her hand!

"My child, this is not the fate I wished for you!" You should have helped me finish the job, not trying to trick me with this trinket! The Empress continued to speak, but no longer with the Prince, but with a stranger. As if he was not here or, rather, they are in some other time, a layer of reality, and he is only allowed to observe what has already happened. Realizing this, he also realized the power of the Empress - she seemed to be beyond time and any restrictions and could talk to the Prince, who was not around at that moment. And the stranger was not calling for help from the Prince at all - Shadi

suddenly appeared from behind her, who, grinning maliciously and triumphantly, looked at the prisoner.

"Shall I help you?" The one who doomed me to certain death? Ha! Shadi said in disgust, spitting at her feet. "Take her away!" Farewell, sister!

The prince just continued to watch. He understood that all this was not really happening, but had happened before and he was only allowed to look. Sister? A child of the Empress? Perhaps this surprised him, he regarded both of them, rather, as her servants.

"I know why you are here," the Empress turned to the Prince again. "Did you really think that I would follow your request?" Shall I leave what I and my ancestors have been moving towards for centuries and millennia? I will never give up on creating the Sands of Time! Their birth is woven on the canvas of existence from the very beginning of this world. You're a fool to think you can stop me!" For two thousand years before your arrival, I easily dealt with anyone who came to my land. Do you think I can't defeat another one? A desperate loner like you is the most hopeless type. I don't even need to fight you—this island will consume you without my help. I am practically out of time and only a few hours separate me from absolute power!

"You don't," the Prince spoke.

–Quite! The Empress shouted back. "Do you think you're the first?" Do you think you were the only one who wanted to stop me? Unlike you, there were people who were smarter! Even in your team. Surprised? Yes! Not long before you, a self-confident and arrogant upstart named Haraz came, who, nevertheless, did not try to stop me. But he clearly wanted to use me and thought that I would share my power with him for some reason! He wanted to gain power and subjugate Babylon! And he offered me to share this triumph. I laughed and drove him crazy!

"That can't be!" You're a liar! The Prince answered her furiously.

"Why do I need this?" Think about it, why else would a person who is called the king's right hand go on such a journey? A what? Is he your faithful companion? Was he going to protect his Prince? Don't be ridiculous! He's just tired of being second! said the Empress. Strangely enough, there was no mockery in her voice now. What if she was telling the truth? And the changes in Haraz were indeed in line with her words.

After a short pause, the Empress continued:

"You can see your girlfriend - I'm giving you this chance. Still, it does not pose any serious threat. She thought to deceive me, hoping that I would not notice a substitution in the timeline. It is absolute and unchanging! And the poor thing decided to play with her fate. Oh, aren't you here for the same thing? Of course, of course, I

understand! But it's all in vain. As for her, I can't kill my own child. And I don't want to kill you just because you're funny and I'm curious how long you can hold out. Go, find her, she is now my eternal prisoner, for unforgivable disobedience and betrayal!

There was silence. The prince did not dare to speak, not out of fear, but out of futility. The Empress, by and large, was not here at all, she only took a couple of minutes to laugh at him.

"Oh, I'm sorry, where are my manners?" Do you see that dagger? Of course, you know him. But how can you pick up a thing that is in two places at the same time? Only I can do it. It's the same with it - one part of it is imprisoned in the Mechanical Tower, among giant machines, and the other is in a rather nice place, in the Garden, which is located in the opposite part of the fortress. Her soul seems to be torn in two, each half of it is like a ghost. Even if you manage to get to her, you can hardly save her. Except to say a few words before she finally lost her mind. Of course, being in two places at the same time, so different – it must be hard! I don't think it will last long. You can ask her about the Ring, but this trick doesn't work on me anyway.

The Empress suddenly stood up from her seat, and a second before the light fell on her face, she raised her hand, snapped her fingers, and vanished into thin air. And with it the whole hall. The Prince felt a little dizzy and had the feeling that someone had been in it. He himself had somehow been transported back to the Central Hall, but this time he was not standing below in front of the huge doors, but in the opening on the opposite side of the one he had seen Haraz in. He turned his head back and felt a breath of freshness and some herbs wafting from there. The prince realized that he had no choice - he was quite unequivocally shown the direction. But he had hope, and it was well founded. If Maharaja managed to steal the dagger, it means that this secret is also available to an ordinary person. And therefore he has a good chance to save the stranger. He only had to figure out what was an illusion and what was not. And are they really separated by as many as two thousand years? Then, it turns out, the Maharaja defeated the Empress in the present? And all these twenty centuries she reigned supreme over the Island and commanded the flow of time?

The prince did not remember and did not imagine how he ended up in this place - it means that the meeting with the Empress simply did not happen. This is only a deception, a suggestion. Most likely, Shadi is really dead, because her dogs turned out to be fake, formidable dummy. But the Empress tried to intimidate him with them and convince him of something, which means that either she needs the Prince alive for some reason, or she is still afraid of him. Naturally! If all she can do is a chaos of deception and illusion, and her own child can deceive her, then she is not so omnipotent. And the

Prince hurried in search of the stranger to the place that the Empress called the Garden. Even if this was a deception, he still didn't have many options - the doors to the throne room were closed again, and he had nowhere else to go. Perhaps, even if the Prince fails to save her from imprisonment, she will at least have time to tell him something important, something effective in the fight against the Empress.

Chapter 15. Sad

Maybe this is the best reward in a person's life – to escape from the noisy life and turn into silence, which comes to life every night and continues its mysterious path, full of wonders incomprehensible to an ordinary person? It is a miracle to help someone so that he himself does not notice this influence, whisper something in a dream and walk away, not expecting gratitude for what he does not seem to do. Quietly wander the world in search of strong souls in need of help. To walk a million roads without sleep and rest, giving everything from yourself, even what only such an invisible and disembodied spirit has, living according to completely different laws together with people, but not noticeable to them...

I had a wonderful dream today, it was he who prompted me to write these strange lines. A dream that almost repeated reality, but surpassed it many times over. Communication with Jatta gave me something that settled deep in me. I cannot describe it in words, and my dream runs away from me with every second. but someone else. Or no one at all – other people's thoughts and feelings are mixed in me. Jatta's consciousness was drawn to me, and I felt like her, a dazzling white blur floating above the ground in complete silence. I don't see any explanation for all this, but now I see in a strange way how much immersion in the Sands and communication in the language of consciousness can give me. What awaits us – a single consciousness or the reincarnation of a person into a new form? Or both at the same time? ***It's a pity that it was just a dream. Another one in a string of my strange, inexplicable visions.***

Namtar's Journal, Entry 35

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The prince felt like a fish caught in a net and then washed ashore. He seemed to be free from fetters, but his new position rather added to his problems. Aside from the fact that he needed to find his way back (he had no idea how he was going to go back down to the Central Hall), the Empress had infiltrated his mind and instilled her thoughts in him. She showed him a whole vision, throwing the threads that entangled him, not only through the massive door, but also through time! The prince had yet to figure out which of all this was true and which was not. And he had almost nothing to oppose to it - it was thoroughly saturated with the Sands; it can penetrate into the most secret corners of his mind, leading him astray. It seems that he has faced an opponent that is too tough for him. Even against Dahaki, he had at least something - he could run

away. The prince did not know the weaknesses of the Empress - it is quite difficult to know something about the enemy without even seeing him in person. But he knew someone who seemed to be able to deceive her even for a moment. No matter how brave she was, it seemed that the stranger in red managed to annoy her pretty much, escaping her all-seeing and vigilant gaze. And if even a grain of what the Empress said was true, then he would find the stranger at all costs. If he saved her life, then he could save his own.

Turning and walking away from the Central Hall, to where the aromas of freshness and some herbs wafted from, the Prince began to think about where he was. Or rather, he was more interested in how he ended up here - he did not remember it. It was as if someone had torn out a part of his consciousness and moved time forward. It seemed that a few moments ago he was standing in front of the entrance to the throne room, preparing for a fight with the stone dogs, which suddenly turned out to be a mirage, a decoy. And now, he was already in the doorway that towered over the Central Hall, separated from his former place by a bottomless abyss that breathed the Sands.

The opening was located high above the floor level in the hall and was separated from it by an abyss. The prince could have fled enough to jump to him, but he didn't even try. The opening seemed to be sealed: the Prince felt it with his hands, but everywhere he came across an invisible, slightly soft barrier that gleamed with the gold of the Sand. He realized that he was being led, implicitly controlled. But if such intervention was required, then there was still hope that he would be able to find what they wanted to pass him by.

A feeling of emptiness squeezed the Prince from the inside, he felt the need to fill it, to regain his memories. It was as if he had lost a part of himself, as if it were not him at all, but someone else. And he woke up in this strange incomprehensible world in his place, and had no idea what to do. This made the Prince's head spin a little - he saw some other life for a second. And the point was not even that in it he was free from the Sands and Dahaks pursuing him, but that he was someone completely different. As if everything around him is a dream from which he seeks to escape. He stopped and took a breath - how deep can you go into the illusion? Wasn't everything around him a fiction now, whether it was built by the Empress or his own inflamed mind? He must find out. It seems that now saving his life is not only about preventing the creation of the Sands of Time and fleeing from Dahaki. Now he had to separate truth from fiction, see himself as if from the inside and know his essence.

At that moment, the Prince felt as if he were looking at himself from the outside. He saw his battle-hardened body, a frown with a split eyebrow and a wary step. In his eyes there was still a burning

desire to live, and it seemed that this race could go on forever. His torture stretched to infinity, like the corridors stretched out in front of him when he ran away from Dahaki. The only question was how soon he would give up, trying to overcome this eternity? And what about the Empress? Yes, she is not being chased by a beast that wants to kill her, but most likely, she strives for eternal life. In this they were similar to the vizier. Apparently, before Maharaja kidnapped Peski and dealt with the Empress, he managed to talk to her. But what does it feel like to be immortal? You can learn all the truths of the world, gain incredible wisdom, see the flourishing and withering of entire eras, but not grow old a bit. Isn't it torture? To be a silent observer – because your voice will dissolve into the centuries – and to go with the flow endlessly. Or even against him – it doesn't matter. Nothing matters! You are not reflected in eternity, but it is reflected in you. The world around you may crumble into dust, turn into memories and even be forgotten, but you are still here, permeated by the flow of time and overwhelmed by absolute foresight. The life of the infinite Universe has already been mapped out by fate to the smallest instant, and all this is right before your eyes. No matter how far you look, you will not see anything new. With such an existence, everything loses its meaning – it does not matter the form in which you exist – you are a human being or a disembodied spirit.

Maybe the Empress is trying to make the Prince understand her? Did he see what she sees and knows and just lost his mind? And with the remnants of his consciousness he voluntarily desired his death, accepting it without a murmur? Because of her, the Prince became his main enemy, drowning in the abyss of his own consciousness, clouded by endless illusions. The Empress penetrated the Prince's mind playfully - and now he is forcibly involved in this game, according to her rules.

The gap in time and in memories was clearly confirmed by the fact that when the Prince reached the throne room, it was daytime - the sun hung almost at its zenith. Now it was confidently going down, the heat of the day was subsiding and night was approaching from somewhere in the distance - a few more hours and the stars would light up in the sky. The prince was distracted from his thoughts, turning his attention to the sun, and remembered the incident in Azad: the one when he, Farah, and Essen met the vizier. Then, right in front of their astonished gaze, the vizier made the luminary overcome half of the sky in a few seconds, turning a cool morning into a hot noon. It means that something similar happened this time. But chasing after the lost memories was pointless - even if there was something in them that could help him, he would rather only lose precious time. Since his attempts were unsuccessful, it was better for

him to focus on finding the stranger and thinking through options for how the near future could turn out.

Meanwhile, the Prince was moving into an unknown part of the castle. The road led him up, through many stairs and ascents. The views here were much more picturesque than the austere halls and gloomy corridors - it seemed that it was built by a completely different person. If the Prince did not know where he was now, then he would even like this place. It went from terrace to terrace, crossing lawns and large open courtyards. Sometimes waterfalls poured from somewhere above, shimmering in the sun. And everywhere he was alone, as if he had been allowed to walk freely around the Island. No one attacked, there were no palace guards to be seen around - in any case, the enemy did not give himself away in any way. Was it freedom or was he really a fish washed up on the sand? There was no need to kill him - soon fate would finish with him itself.

The sands, which have already swallowed up the fortress, soaking it through and turning it into something more, capable of shifting time and turning it back, being transformed into a new form, will probably be capable of something absolutely incredible. And the Empress strives to possess this power - perhaps immortality will be only a pleasant, but insignificant addition. It was difficult for the prince to imagine this incredible power, if only because even now he did not understand what was happening to him. In these reflections, he seems to be walking in circles, like a caged animal – it makes him incredibly angry, but he is completely powerless. Still, the Prince was still able to move forward, and it was much more useful. Even if each step plunges him more and more into the emptiness of nothingness – let him! His whole life turned into a race, until he was caught or burned...

The prince decided to distract himself from the momentary search for answers and thought about what he saw in the throne room. Even if it had really happened a few hours ago, for him it was the events of the last minutes, they were still literally in front of his eyes. First, he learned that Shadi and the stranger were sisters, daughters of the Empress herself. And, apparently, she had high hopes for the one who was now a prisoner. And she trusted Shadi only with the protection of the Island, but did not assign her any special role. A child who went against the will of his parents - he knows this firsthand. In this he and her were incredibly similar and he felt that he should try to help her, and not only for the sake of his own salvation. The prince remembered his quarrels with his father – he even threatened to put him in prison if he disobeyed his will and tried to leave Babylon at such an important moment. And who would

come to his aid then? A person needs hope – only he himself lived by it, and as long as he lived, there was hope for it.

However, the Prince was sure that Shadi was dead and everything he saw was manipulation of his consciousness. The Empress's attempts to intimidate and confuse him. The events that he saw must have happened, but in a different form. Or maybe in a completely different time, before his arrival on the Island. Perhaps he saw part of the moment when the promising daughter was about to make her her successor? – for the first time I was caught in a lie. But he got some kind of altered, corrected version of events, fused together with those that happened after the appearance of the Prince and the death of Shadi. Events and images were mixed up like clouds of smoke, and it was difficult to see what was real and what was not. Especially if there were several realities. And, most likely, something similar was happening to him now - the smoke continued to swirl in his mind and he had no idea where exactly he was and where he was going. Perhaps his end goal looks very different, and he needs to make every effort to see the truth in this thick haze.

At the same time, the Prince was overcome by doubts and questions - why did the Empress need all these difficulties? After all, she could simply lock herself in the throne room, hide in another time and not let him near her, calmly completing the creation of the Sands. And he could hardly do anything. Yes, perhaps she is really afraid of him, despite all her arrogance and domineering, but the advantage is definitely on her side. She knows what he does not know; It has a special power, even if its whole essence is throwing dust in the eyes, deception and obfuscation. She is playing for time, just like the vizier once was, because the Sands, in their final form, are still not at her disposal. But how did it happen that he got to this very moment in the past, literally the day before the creation of Peski? All these questions and contradictions were intertwined into an unimaginably complex and intricate tangle of timelines and human destinies. And there wouldn't be a sword that could cut it. The prince had always been ready for any, even the most desperate and cruel fight, but only now it turned out that it would not solve anything now. He had no one to fight with.

Perhaps everything around is one continuous illusion. Where is he then? In eternal captivity? Lost? How to find a way out? Is he still alive at all? All these thoughts crossed his mind as he continued to walk in an unknown direction. The beauty and unusualness of these places involuntarily gave rise to suspicions in him that nothing of the material around him was actually real. And the truth was that he was inside some great fiction, a wonderful mirage that was supposed to distract or confuse him. What then happens to his body if only his consciousness is moving? Or was the illusion superficial, and its

purpose was only to distract the Prince? At that time, any wall could hide a secret passage or the true appearance of a fortress. He tried to find at least a small crack through which he could see at least something. To find a slight flaw in his impeccable fantasy would have helped him to bring down the vaults of this prison of reason at once. But the Prince did not succeed in this - the illusion was all-consuming, resembling reality to the smallest detail. Maybe he is still wrong? Along with all the suspicions, he couldn't shake the feeling that such familiar feelings and smells couldn't just be fake. I wanted to believe that all this was real. Could it be that the Empress had penetrated so deeply into his mind that she could control his feelings? What awaits him at the end of the journey? Could it be, in accordance with her promises, that he would find the unfortunate captive? And he, like a valiant man in shining armor, will save her from certain death?

Unable to fully understand what was in front of him, the Prince incomprehensibly accepted both versions as true. At the same time, despite their complete opposite. It was only difficult to say whether they coexist, but do not intersect, creating a complete picture of what is happening, or they are mixed in each other and represent a kind of third essence, which can hardly be described in the words of any of the human languages. Such a strange mental construct that the Prince had suddenly built literally crumbled at any attempt to describe it in words. But it seemed real enough, if you just contemplate it, even if involuntarily.

Most likely, the point was that the whole fortress is not just a place. This is the interweaving of different times - each separate room could be filled with a different time - the Prince has already managed to make sure of this. In this case, ordinary doors and arches ceased to be ordinary - they were windows at another time. True, so far he has managed to encounter this only once, but it is unlikely that someone will lay out all the secrets of the castle in front of him. He saw only the simplest thing to realize – the portals of time. However, the fortress was more complicated. The prince wouldn't even be surprised if, while passing through the same place, he didn't find some kind of door or corridor over time. The whole castle was one big invention based on a skeleton of stone and metal. The entire fortress is the halls of the Empress's mind. A bridge between the Sands and man, a neutral territory. A logical construction, a fantasy embodied in stone and allowing the most incredible things to be brought to life. It was endless, at least as much as the Empress's own abilities were enough to do so. By connecting her mind with the Sands, she turned the entire fortress into something never seen before. It is not known what was the continuation of what. Did the Sand spawn her mind or vice versa? Or was their fusion the very

thing that could not be described in words, but still existed? And the creation of the Sands of Time would finally complete this fusion. It turns out that then he will become part of all this? But how is this different from dying in the clutches of Dahaka?

The prince suddenly imagined Sand climbing right under his skin, soaking and filling him. From this, he became bigger and bigger. Now he no longer fits into the corridor in which he was standing and he runs to the exit, but gets stuck, unable to move anymore. However, instead of pain, he feels something else - his so-called body, continuing to grow, takes the form of corridors and halls that meet him on the way. He is like water filling a vessel. And now, he has already reached all, even the farthest corners of the fortress - its prisoner and only owner at the same time. And then the body, suddenly, begins to melt, leaving only the mind. And this mind does not belong to him. It is permeated through with Sand, it is Sand. And this is not his mind at all, but the mind of the Empress, of which he unwittingly became a part. Everything here was her will, her consciousness. The border between body and mind was erased, everything turned into Sand. And there was nothing else.

The Prince's glassy gaze betrayed not just deep thoughtfulness in him, but complete detachment from any reality. He slowed down a little, but he still continued to walk, there was still nothing to prevent it. In his imagination, he suddenly clearly imagined the infinity of all the variants of the fortress and all kinds of mental constructions - and this deeply struck him. His every step felt like a senseless marking time - he did not change anything in the general chaos. And this infinity, despite the expected variety of possible outcomes, was one big trap – any path led him to death. Fate, meeting any resistance, turned into a wild beast, then into a labyrinth without an exit, despite the innumerability of all possible moves. It seemed that another second, and the Prince would freeze in place as if rooted to the spot and never take another step. He will turn into a stone statue in the middle of this incredible labyrinth, struck to the core by such overwhelming clarity and hopelessness.

And, perhaps, it would have happened so, if the next second he had not stumbled, suddenly, on an uneven stone and almost fell. It only pulled him out of the grip of his own thoughts for a moment, but it was enough. He suddenly realized that another second and he would have fallen into a bottomless abyss, which was ready to devour him completely. A kind of emotional pit that at first confused him, but now rather inspired him. He was aware that the Empress was not just playing with him, but was really beating him, looking for his weak spot - it was at least remotely similar to the battle he was used to. He understood that he could continue to fight for his life, albeit at the cost of incredible efforts. Over the next few minutes, he experienced

these feelings, a kind of "highs" and "falls" several more times. His thoughts jumped from the strange but incredibly tempting "Shouldn't he stay here?" and "Should he hurry?" to the desire "Leave no stone unturned here, but just to destroy this damned illusion!"

He had to get to the Empress in time, not only because after her creation of the Sands, Dahaka would never give up his pursuit of the Prince. Beyond that, he was frightened by the thought of how powerful the Empress would be if she could do it now. How did Maharaja manage to defeat her and take the Sands to India, since he arrived on the Island at a time when the Sands had already been created? To be on time is his last and only chance.

For a while, the Prince pondered whether his movements were important in this case, or whether it was all about his attitude, the state of his mind. What if only the power of thought helps him to move forward? It was as if two possible options opened up before him: to continue moving and reach the goal (although it was not known how long it would take) or to break free from the captivity of illusions at once, stopping all his wanderings with one decisive blow. However, the second method was nothing more than an idea born of reasoning from the opposite. Apart from the idea itself, the Prince had nothing to offer - he had no idea how to throw off the shackles in an instant and whether it was possible at all.

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the view that opened up in front of him, after which he left the next corridor. It was truly amazing, although it was surprisingly familiar.

"It seems that it is not only in Babylon that you can discover all the splendor of the hanging gardens," the Prince muttered under his breath, looking around in surprise.

It stood at the entrance to a huge hall, which was located under the open sky and did not have a fourth wall, and the two side ones somewhere in the distance faded away. At the same time, they were all covered with dense vegetation hanging here and there. Plants twisted around the columns, were thrown in threads from one end to the other. Flowers and fragrant herbs grew everywhere in the flowerbeds, a smell that was especially familiar to the Prince and made him feel homesick. Streams of water poured directly from the walls, irrigating some of the plants, and then rushing along the ground channels to the rest. Directly from the entrance, two rows of trees went into the distance, which were preceded by two statues surrounded by columns with single crenellated crowns. The statues depicted a very young girl and an older woman, with strict facial features, each of whom held a large jug in her hands, from which water also poured. Rushing through a small drain into irrigation canals, the water formed an artificial pond around the statue, making the whole structure look like a fountain.

Instead of the usual stone floor, everything around looked like a solid green carpet. Several tiers of balconies were arranged on the walls, which were just as densely covered with vegetation, and the bases of the walls were not solid, but with inserts of beautiful wrought iron lattices, entwined with greenery. A breeze blew from somewhere above, swirling the plucked leaves and petals in the air - the trees behind the fountains were in bloom.

Along with the seeming unreality of this place, the Prince was used to the cold austerity of corridors and halls, and suddenly this! – he noted its similarity to the gardens of Babylon. He could once wander through them for hours, being in a state of amazing peace and detachment from the hustle and bustle. And on one of these walks, trying to drown out the swarm of his thoughts on his return from Azad, he came across this unfortunate symbol, which was hung everywhere - and even in this kingdom of nature there were several walls on which red banners were attached. Putting these thoughts together, the Prince was surprised at the sudden similarity between the gardens in Babylon and the Isle. And this symbol was a connecting link – how is this possible? Did the descendants of the inhabitants of the Isle once have a hand in the creation of the hanging gardens of Babylon? However, the Prince knew their real story from his father and was not surprised that such a thing was possible. But what was the connection between these completely different peoples?

The prince moved forward again, in the only available direction. He noticed how with each step the memories awakened in him more and more - they were superimposed on top of what he saw and merged into one. Sometimes it seemed to him that he was walking not on the Island of Time, but on his native Babylon, and now, around the next turn, he would suddenly see a giant tower piercing the sky. Moreover, this place was also arranged like a tower - the Prince was constantly climbing up, from tier to tier, from ladder to ladder. And then, suddenly, all his problems and torments would turn to dust, dissolve into the abyss of memories, melting behind him like the morning mist. It was as if he was moving from a dream to reality, slowly leaving it and watching how the world turned from bizarre and slightly outlandish into completely ordinary and familiar.

"Good try," thought the Prince. Despite the power and persuasiveness of the illusions, he was still able to discern the Empress's deception. Danger and traps awaited him at every turn, and now it was clear why there were no guards around to stop him - because the real battle was not taking place with swords and the Empress was powerful enough to try to defeat him alone, with her own methods.

Meanwhile, the Prince noted that during all this time, the sun did not move. Either so little time had passed, or it was another trick - instead of speeding up time, the Empress tried slowing down on it. No matter! He will continue to move forward no matter what. After all, the fact that his opponent continues to throw such tricks at him only indicates that he is on the right track!

Passing through an avenue of flowering trees, the Prince descended the marble staircase to the open area of the Garden, which had the shape of an elongated circle. It was planted with neat bushes, arranged in circles around a strange rotunda. Water gushed straight from its roof, and then spread along the dome so that it fell evenly to the ground around its perimeter and was carried away along the canals. The rotunda was larger than usual, and the Prince had a natural question - what was the point of this building? But with the next guess he answered it himself, remembering where else he had seen the entrance, fenced off by a wall of water. Portal! But the last thing the Prince wanted was to go back to the time where Dahaka was waiting for him around every corner. He decided to leave the time portal option as a backup plan if there was no other choice. But, if the Empress really does not know that he has the medallion - the portal was not active - then this step may be sudden for her and it may disappear from her sight for a while.

Rounding the rotunda, the Prince looked back at the portal for the last time, stepping forward for a while, not looking at his feet. His mind continued to cling to the idea of traveling back in time, but he overcame his doubts and walked away—those doubts were not his own either. But as soon as he turned, a familiar image suddenly appeared in front of him - a monster that had emerged from a whirlwind of sand and a flock of crows hovered in the air in front of him again. Like the previous time, he held a long, elegant sword in his hand and politely waited for the Prince to fight. But the latter, finally convinced that he was able to distinguish truth from falsehood, took a few confident steps forward and, without drawing his sword, put out his hands in front of him and spread them in opposite directions, as if dispersing the vision. And the monster had indeed disappeared, leaving only a ghostly haze in the air that quickly dissipated. The prince thought that he still had to meet the Creature in order to finish the list of monster illusions. And he even expected that simultaneously with the thought that arose in him, a reaction from the Empress would follow in the form of another vision. But this did not happen.

Turning around, the Prince grinned and moved towards the edge of the huge ledge that ended in this section of the Garden. The next one began on the other side of the gorge, on the slopes of which the whole part of the castle was built. The sea splashed faintly below,

and the rocks at the end of the gorge were crowned with some towers connected to the rest of the fortress and between each other by long bridges. Between these towers and the place where the Prince stood, long aqueducts with several branches were built on high elongated supports - they were the main source of water, bringing it from somewhere in the mountains.

Suddenly, the Prince's attention was attracted by some silhouettes on the bridge near one of the towers. Through the repeated echo of the streams of water reverberating from the walls of the gorge, the Prince could barely hear a scream... People. It seemed something really unusual after the long silence, which was occasionally broken only by his own voice. The prince looked closely and saw several people waving to him and shouting something. He recognized them as one of the crew members, but what were they doing here, and even at this time? They had to sail away from the Island on a ship, staying in the present and possibly waiting for the Prince. No, it can't be true! Another deception! After all, the Empress spoke only about Kharaz...

The prince closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head from side to side. When he opened them, there was no one in the distance. Well, great, he managed to cope with this vision, but it is worth giving the Empress her due, with each new attempt, she became more and more inventive. Perhaps the most real thing that the Prince was facing now was a wide abyss. It was impossible to jump over it - for this he would need wings, and therefore he had to find some more realistic way. Wandering around, he came across a staircase behind the bushes that led directly underground. Seeing no other options, the Prince descended it and, turning sharply once, came to a wide stone bridge that connected the edges of the gorge and stood on giant stone piers that went into the water. Why didn't he see it from above? Is she really capable of even that? He needs to find some way to hide his thoughts from the Empress. Maybe the locket is capable of this and it is something more than just a key? After all, in fact, he controls it with the help of his mind, although he does not understand how exactly.

After crossing the bridge, the Prince climbed a similar staircase and decided to look around. Everything looked a little different here - instead of a huge green carpet that covered even the walls, several tiers were arranged in this part of the Garden, on which trees and some incomprehensible plants grew. The trees had already borne fruit, which hung from the branches in bright orange and red drops. Most likely, food is grown here for ... whom? The Empress and her two daughters? It is unlikely that sand monsters need food.

And suddenly the Prince saw what struck him more than anything else – he saw people. Right in front of him, about forty paces

away. They went from bush to bush, from tree to tree. Someone with baskets for picking fruits and vegetables, someone with tools or huge bags - everyone was clearly busy with work. The prince thought that he was facing another illusion, but suddenly someone pushed him in the shoulder from behind - one of the people passed by, hitting him with a large bag. Realizing that it was not a mirage, the Prince peered into their faces. They were dejected and indifferent. Nobody talked to each other – everyone just worked as if they were part of some kind of mechanism. Their eyes expressed nothing, perhaps only a slight shade of immensely deep sadness, which, however, faded with time. The prince remembered Haraz and his confused words during their second meeting. What if he had completely lost his mind and was now walking somewhere among these poor souls? Once a noble nobleman of the great Babylon, he turned into an ordinary gardener, without memory and will. And now he serves the Empress, who destroyed his consciousness, but left him as a human - the Prince drew attention to the fact that the eyes of these slaves were still completely human, there was not a spark of orange or yellow in them.

The prince caught up with the one who had touched him on the shoulder and grabbed him by the arm, saying:

"Hey, tell me...

But the latter unceremoniously pulled his hand back, waved it away, as if pushing the Prince away, and walked on with his business. The Prince tried again several more times, with other workers, but each time he was similar to the previous one – these people did not belong to themselves and saw no other goal than to carry out the will of the Empress. Their minds were clouded, and they no longer had any chance of escape. So, what fate awaits him too? First Haraz, and now him? Now he understood where these strange thoughts like "What if I stay here safely?" or "Do I need to hurry?" came from. Endlessly lengthening his path and waiting for the moment when he runs out of steam, both physically and mentally.

It turns out that people still lived in these places, but they left their homes on the outer island long ago and live right here, perhaps sleeping in the open air, dragging out a slave existence. Prisoners of their own minds, they hadn't even made mistakes like the one the Prince had made. They were just unlucky enough to be born on this cursed island! For a moment, the Prince even had the idea of freeing them from their torment by ending their lives. But he hesitated - killing unarmed people was not part of his habits. He felt sorry for them, but he was powerless. The only thing he could do was try not to repeat their difficult fate.

But this very fate, obviously, the Empress tried in every possible way to arrange for him, depriving him of his will and turning him into

a pitiful semblance, a shadow of the past man. She must have done this to many enemies, if the threat was not too obvious. Where else would these slaves and sand warriors come from? After all, it was necessary to constantly find someone to replace the fallen. Therefore, the Empress did not seek to kill her enemies - if she wanted, she would be able to deal with the Prince in the blink of an eye, setting her entire army against him. And if he managed to escape from the clutches of Dahaki in the present, then, returning to the past, he certainly found himself in her world and became a kind of prisoner of this place, although he could continue to move freely.

Looking at the workers, the Prince thought again about the Creature he had met several times. What if he is wrong in his assumptions? What if he is not a slave tormented by the Empress, like these people around him and he does not run to his death at all? His hostility towards the Prince can be explained by the fact that he is hostile to everything in general, except for some of his own goals. What if this is someone who challenged the Empress herself even though she had turned him into? Or is he one of those who have seen the light? But if he never met him in this illusion, then the Empress had no idea that they had met? Or rather, does not know about its existence at all?! Well, the next meeting with him can be considered a sign that the Prince has returned to reality.

Suddenly, he realized another problem: his attention was endlessly scattered on extraneous things. After all, what did he care about the fate of all these slaves and this Creature, if he could not cope with his own? Moreover, the Empress constantly adds fuel to the fire, confusing it every minute and trying to delay or stop it altogether. No, enough!

The prince took out a locket from under his armor and peered at it: the same crescent moon with a thick dot in the center. He peered attentively at this point and thought that he could try to move his thoughts as if inside a locket. And then his correct guesses about where to go or what to do will not be seen by the Empress, but will turn the locket into a key even more powerful than before. A concentrated thought that is not subject to distortion and will allow him to find a secret door in this strange artificial reality. In doing so, he may think of anything that will distract the Empress and deceive her about his real goals.

Pressing the locket to his forehead and closing his eyes, the Prince thought about how he would get to the place where the stranger he had saved from Shadi was being held captive. Using the locket, he would get there unnoticed, because now he would remove it from his forehead, open his eyes and think about anything - remember, for example, Farah - and her mirage would immediately pop up in front of him, he was sure. And then he will imagine that a

dead end awaits him, and he will pound on the wall in despair, seeing no other ways. And he will convince himself that he has forgotten even about the backup plan - a journey through the portal to the present. And he will also convince the Empress that he is desperate and is about to lose his mind, like Haraz. But the medallion will remember the truth, and will lead the Prince, behind the veil of deception before the eyes of the Empress. Hitting the enemy with his own weapon is just an excellent plan!

"Have you forgotten me?" Farah's voice came from somewhere behind.

The prince noted with displeasure that the vision was very convincing and really hurt his feelings deeply. But he pretended to give vent to his feelings, imagined throwing himself into the arms of this mirage. How she believes in him so much that he is able to convince himself of his materiality – so much so that he feels the warmth of her hands, hears her breathing... And at this time, the locket leads him, driven by his true purpose, which he has conveyed to him with the help of his mind. The medallion was like a torch, which helps you make your way in absolute darkness. And while the Prince himself is in the captivity of illusions and visions, his thoughts live in the medallion and he is actually moving forward, and not marking time. As if he is in two places at the same time, but one of them is real, and the other is not.

Feeling his consciousness literally tear in two, the Prince continued to climb upstairs to what looked like an exit. Overcoming the madness that gripped his consciousness and the complete lack of understanding of what was happening, mixed with untimely heightened feelings, the Prince finally reached the huge door. From below, he saw that there was no door, but now it was - another mirage! For the Prince whom the Empress sees, fake, false. And the real one, although he did not show it, was sure that it would pass right through.

Banging his forehead against the large wooden double door, the Prince at one point overestimated the situation and reluctantly realized that the door was still quite real. For a few seconds, not yet fully recovered, he rushed desperately to feel the wall nearby, hoping that he would be able to find a hole or a secret passage. That even a small part of it would turn out to be a vision, a dummy. But this did not happen and, slowly but surely, he came to the realization that his plan had failed – it did not work either at all or practically. Yes, he had a chance to take a different look at the visions thrown by the Empress, but he still failed to deceive her. Maybe, only if slightly and for a very short time. Reluctantly, he turned and glanced at the portal that could be seen in the center of the circle in the previous section of the Garden. Now this is his only chance, but this time he will have

one more enemy. Although, perhaps the Empress's spell is not so strong and does not work through such huge time intervals. At least he knew the way back and most likely it would not be difficult for him to use the locket for time travel again. He made the entire return trip with a feeling of bitterness from the failed plan of deception. But at first he even felt a slight delight - so elegant did this trick seem to him. But, alas, he was seen through almost immediately. Well, time is his enemy and ally at the same time. This fits perfectly with the idea of the duality of this place, which was and was not an illusion at the same time. You just need to be able to distinguish one from the other in time. And the normal flow of time did not make much sense at all in this place.

The prince stood at the door for a few more seconds, leaning on it with his hand and closing his eyes. Opening them, he turned and was taken aback: he found himself in another place! But in his palm he could still feel the wooden door. It seems that he found himself on the other side of it! But how? He was well aware of the path that would lead him through this door - a return to the present, where the door rotted and fell off its hinges, another meeting with Dahaka and a return to the past. Does the Empress control the will of this monster? And is the door in front of him real? Or did he fall through time again?

The prince found himself under the arches of some hall carved into the rock, but in its depths he saw only a hazy darkness - the path ahead frightened him with absolute uncertainty. Coolness and dampness emanated from the stone, and there was an unbearable silence all around. The prince tried to take a few steps towards the unknown, but at the same moment despair literally fell upon him, filled with impulses to escape. An unbearable desire to be on the other side of this door, to leave the place where he longed so much! This literally torn his mind in two, as if the Empress was confronting him with himself - such an incredible struggle was taking place inside his head. It seemed to him that he was really in two places at the same time.

Opening a locked door from the right side was not at all difficult, and the Prince felt that he could not resist this urge. He was literally hanging on by a thread. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, the Prince opened his eyes and saw that he was outside again, at this cursed door. What was that? A vision for the future? But the only purpose for which it was shown to him was to intimidate him. The Empress seems to have realized that it is not so easy to break his will and began to distort not only the reality and time around him, but also the future, his immediate plans. They seemed vague and dangerous to him, but he did not remember them. He had been that Prince on the other side of the door too short. And, perhaps, he could

not remember what had not happened yet. Or he forgot like a dream. A nightmare from which he suddenly woke up in a cold sweat, remembering almost nothing - a fleeting vision immediately floated away. It slipped away like sand through your fingers. In order to comprehend this future, to understand it, it had to be lived. But was it the future at all, something that would really happen?

This single, but correctly asked question, suddenly washed over the Prince with a wave of awareness. A deep insight that made him freeze in place, his gaze rested on one point on the door, and a chill ran down his spine. Either horror, or admiration for the insidiousness of the Empress and the resourcefulness of her mind and imagination. In this place, time flowed in a special way – the future was the past, and the past was the future. And all his way from the Central Hall to this door, he seemed to be going in the opposite direction, seeing reality like a reflection in a mirror! And the starting point was the end point, and the end point was the starting point. Somewhere out there, in the darkness, lies the real beginning. But time after time, he ran away from him to the Central Hall, the point at which he could no longer remember anything, felt completely lost, forgetting the true goal, which was what the Empress wanted! For the tenth or hundredth time, until he finally goes mad. He must, at all costs, get to the source, which lies somewhere behind this door - a mirror of reality, despite all the threats and tricks of the enemy. It's a real challenge!

On this side of the door, the Prince felt trapped. He knew the future - the complete oblivion from which he began his journey was in fact the end of this path - once he turned back, this joyless ending would definitely await him. The beginning lay somewhere behind the door, in the true past. His mind desperately resisted this idea of time and space - in it, all the usual norms were broken, turned inside out. He did not feel the world around him in the usual sense, he could not find the thread by holding on to which he could get to the place and time he needed. But this point, near the door, despite all the contradictions of thoughts and feelings, was a salvation for him - here his mind was more sober and cold than ever. He had to beat himself - after all, he was just a reflection of who he managed to feel himself for a second. His consciousness is now in the illusion that he was, and his real body was owned by no one at all - it seems that now the Prince understood what the Empress was talking about, saying "Only I can be in two places at the same time!"

The only image that came to his mind now was running backwards. And this will allow him to move from the future to the past, on a small scale. By moving through space in this way, he moved through time, even where it had stopped altogether. And only when he reached the source, he would be able to fully become

himself again, uniting his body and mind! With every step he took away from the Central Hall, he no longer began to understand, he only remembered what he already knew.

What allowed him not to fall into the abyss, to stop at the line and preserve consciousness? Could it be that the medallion that retained a piece of his mind? It seemed that he had greatly underestimated its value and true capabilities until now! All the better because the Empress does not know that the Prince possesses it. With his help, he will be able to get through this door, breaking free from the trap in which he found himself - a prisoner of his own consciousness halfway between a dead end and absolute oblivion. If the Empress wanted to lure him into a time portal, she would leave him active. But instead, she wanted to lock him in a dead end, not knowing that the Prince had a locket! He could only hope that all this was happening to him for the first time and he did not run back and forth many times, but only managed to stay on the edge without falling into unconsciousness. He just did not immediately correctly imagine the noose in which he fell.

Without wasting another minute, the Prince rushed down the terraces, past the Empress's slaves, who were still dejected and monotonously doing something. He crossed the bridge, climbed the stairs, and dove under the dome of the rotunda where the time portal was. On the way back, he only noticed how his consciousness melted piece by piece and his memory faded - he needed to quickly continue moving in the chosen direction! It was like the beginning of a dream, struggling to keep all the details and thoughts of what was happening, but it came out with great difficulty.

And then the Prince suddenly noticed that the portal was already activated! He didn't even need to use the medallion to repeat the time travel. He stepped into the sand cloud and felt the whirlwind pick him up and drag him into the present. It turns out that the Empress has changed her mind? But only to set another trap!

Going outside, the Prince immediately prepared for an unpleasant meeting. But the surroundings were still quiet and empty. Only all kinds of vegetation became much more - the greenery literally covered this place completely, even the rotunda itself. The trees that used to be only twice as tall as the Prince have now grown significantly. And they were located in other places, which means that more than one of their generations has changed - the Prince has been transported many centuries ahead in time, perhaps even a couple of millennia, as the Empress said. The fortress was in ruins, in which, however, the familiar outlines were surprisingly easy to see. Soaked in the Sands, it aged incredibly slowly and extremely reluctantly.

Approaching the edge of the cliff, the Prince found that the bridge had collapsed, but the crowns of the trees had grown so large that he could climb to the other side along the long, thick branches growing roughly in the middle of the trees. The prince climbed one of them and, carefully moving his legs and arms, walked along one of the thickest and most reliable branches and jumped onto a nearby tree. Descending from it, he found himself on the other side and hurried to the door.

On both sides of the entrance there were almost collapsed statues of elders with some kind of bowls in their hands, into which water flowed from somewhere above and, overflowing, ran down. For some reason, the prince hadn't seen them in the past or paid any attention to them. Or maybe it was because at that time the Empress's illusions were weaker and he was able to see at least something? Everything around existed in a kind of borderline state, when the illusion fought with reality. This opposition made the sun not move – because in time truth and fiction went in different directions. With these thoughts in mind, the Prince approached the cherished point and found that despite his resistance to aging, the door was still rotten and an opening had formed at the bottom, into which he crouched and crawled.

On the other side was an ordinary corridor, of which the Prince had already seen enough. Walking along it, he came out onto a balcony, on one side of which the steep wall of the fortress towered, and on the other a gaping cliff. The horizon and half of the sky in this place were covered by rocks, from which streams of water ran down. But they moved as if from the bottom up! But this only confirmed the Prince's guesses.

He ran along the balcony, practically not distracted by examining other details. The fortress was incomprehensibly arranged in such a way that it forcibly led the Prince in one direction, like fate.

After overcoming a few more short corridors and small rooms, the Prince again came out into the open space: a huge courtyard covered with dense vegetation, which again suddenly ended with a cliff and a beautiful view of the wide bay. In addition to trees and herbs, this place was littered with huge fragments of walls that broke off over time. It seems that something else was built here, but now only a pile of ruins remains. The water, rising from the bottom up, poured randomly into the walls, from huge potholes in the ground - once these were channels for watering plants. Now it was a force, along with time, slowly eating away at the fortress.

Having found a few convenient ledges, the Prince slid down and approached the place that interested him when viewed from a height. Twisted rusty bars retained the outlines of a cage - quite large, but still a prison. And there was no doubt as to who her prisoner was.

The prince walked around the cage and found a skeleton.

"I think I've found the right place, but at the wrong time," thought the Prince.

He felt that it was becoming easier and easier for him to breathe. His mind was almost free from the influence of the Empress. In addition, the Prince felt that he was already close to the source. In fact, this place was him, but he had to find another portal and go back in time to finally talk to a stranger. Only this time he will choose a different path - he will find it, no matter what! Or she will help him if he tells her everything he has managed to find out. It was from here that the real he left, not knowing what awaited him ahead. But now he knew everything and would not allow himself to be plunged into this abyss again.

The prince bent down and tried to remove the ring with a large red stone from the skeleton's finger, but another disappointment awaited him - like the dagger, it turned out to be fake. Well, the Empress warned him and it seems that she did not lie - the prisoner was divided, doomed to go mad, trying to fill the void in the place of the other half. And with it, in two places, half of the ring existed, but nowhere completely. How will he be able to unite these halves, even when he regains himself and the normal course of time? Well, at least it is possible – all that remains is to apply this method in a similar situation. But first you will need to get to the second half. It seemed that the Empress was saying something about her, and the Prince felt that his memory was gradually returning to him and the darkness in his mind was parting.

The sea that rustled against the rocks somewhere in the distance suddenly calmed down, and absolute silence reigned around. This could hardly be called a good omen, although the place seemed ominous even without it. Crudely, as if with a couple of careless strokes, a reality painted that should not have existed at all - he was now out of sight, outside the boundaries of the illusory world of the Empress. But this did not mean that he was safe...

Even before the Prince felt the cold coming from the ground and noticed how the air thickened, and everything around him was covered with a strange gray-yellow haze, he suddenly heard a strange voice in complete silence. He could hardly say that he knew these words, but, as in the case of the stranger, he understood their meaning in an incomprehensible way:

"Many have come before you. And all, as one, fell in a battle with fate! Dahaka said.

At the same time as the last word, the Prince realized who these words belonged to and, turning, jumped to the side, dodging the tentacles of the monster. They struck the bars of the cage, strongly concave them inward.

"Is it talking?" – flashed through the Prince's head. Although he did not rule out that it seemed to him that the Empress's magic had not lost all its power even at this time. But in any case, he didn't have time to think now. With all his strength, the Prince rushed into the dark corridor on the opposite side of the courtyard - hoping that he would not turn out to be a dead end. Even after such a strange incident, the Prince didn't have the slightest desire to check whether this was the real Dahaka or another mirage.

The Prince's fear was replaced by rage. A blind, impotent rage that he could not direct at his enemy. He could only run, desperately grasping at life, swept through by cold and madness. Winding along the corridor, he jumped over the holes in the floor every now and then - it seemed to him that he was running faster than ever - after all, he was so close to his goal! But the beast was literally on his heels - he could move as he pleased, covering huge distances in one fell swoop or making jumps, simply disappearing and appearing out of thin air. His heavy footsteps and jumps shook the walls, like metal clanking on stone, as if it were in armor.

Without considering the road, the Prince flew out of the corridor onto a wide balcony and ran along the wall. At some point, he noticed that he had collapsed in front of him and in front of him was only an abyss and an unreachably distant opposite edge. All he could count on was a tall, narrow pillar, one of those that propped up the balcony. Without slowing down or even thinking, the Prince pushed off the edge and flew towards the column - even such a mad jump gave him a better chance of saving his life than a few seconds of hesitation or reflection.

Wrapping his arms and legs around the column, the Prince turned around by inertia (he deliberately jumped a little to the side so as not to crash into his chest and face), and then instantly slid down - to the balcony in the tier below. Perhaps all this turned out to be luck - the upper tier ended with another blind door, and now the Prince saw ahead, on the left, an open passage, into which he hurried to turn.

"There must be another portal somewhere nearby! Come on, come on!" thought the Prince.

A few minutes ago, he was still hoping that he would be able to overcome this section of the path in the present without meeting Dahaka. But, apparently, this was not destined to come true at all - he pursued him wherever the Prince was. Even when he really didn't know where he was. He managed to hide from the monster for years until he found himself on this cursed island! Here, Dahaka's power increased enormously and left the Prince almost no chance. However, this was hardly surprising.

The prince heard the sound of water ahead - it and a few steps preceded the entrance to the hall with a portal. A saving line beyond which he can breathe out calmly for a moment. But suddenly the Prince noted that he did not see Dahaki. It is unlikely that the animal will just stop the pursuit. Having already managed to note the intelligence of the monster, the Prince decided that there was no way to stop. It is unlikely that he will be able to predict his actions, given that he is the demon of fate himself. After all, it is he who, if not writes it, then brings it to life. And, this time, Dahaka once again took the shortest route, crashing down the wall to the Prince's left with a crash and roar just as he was running past. One of the stones hit him in the leg, causing the Prince to fall, not reaching the saving wall from the water. Fierce with pain and his own helplessness, the Prince could think of nothing better than to grab a stone from the ground and throw it at the beast. Tom did not like such a trick, his eyes turned red. Meanwhile, the Prince drew his sword, preparing for the last fight of his life, resting his elbow on one of the steps. Dahaka waved his hand and another piece flew off the wall, flying in the direction of the Prince.

"No one can escape from Dahaki!" The monster said again.

After that, the beast took a few steps towards its victim, but then something happened that saved the Prince, giving him time to crawl to safety: the ceiling collapsed along with the wall. The corridor was littered with debris that separated the Prince and Dahaka. There was a dull furious roar, and the next moment everything stopped - the monster was gone.

"Good," thought the Prince, struggling with the pain in his leg, "All that's left is to go back in time." However, at this time, the way back was closed to him anyway - it would take him forever to sort out this pile of stones and debris.

Stepping into the golden cloud, the Prince felt the usual lightness in his body. Oh, if only he had time to understand everything that was happening around him. But his life turned into a set of incomprehensible fragments, rapidly flowing into each other, without any system or purpose. Why didn't the Sands kill him? After all, he wants to destroy them using their own power. Instead, they grant him the opportunity to run on! Perhaps this is another trap, the purpose of which is to gain trust and then betray, at the most unexpected and inopportune moment. Or is it all about the medallion again? Perhaps he should ask these questions to someone who can really answer them. Therefore, the Prince hurried to leave the hall and go to meet the stranger who was languishing in a very strange, it must be said, prison, right in the middle of a blooming garden. And again he felt as if someone was trying to penetrate his mind, replacing reality with illusions.

But suddenly, the Prince encountered a new obstacle as soon as he stepped out into the corridor: the Creature suddenly appeared ahead. For the first time, the Prince had a chance to get a good look at him: his figure did resemble a human, but otherwise he hardly did. Instead of skin, he was covered in some black rags that strangely writhed around him like snakes. It was definitely not wool or clothes, but rather some kind of incomprehensible haze enveloping his entire body. Almost the entire face of the Creature was covered with a white spot - from the forehead to the mouth; And only the lower jaw was black. Similar shapeless spots were visible on his forearms. Two eyes without pupils emitted white light, but his face expressed nothing, neither emotion nor intention.

In the next second, the Creature drew a sword from behind its back and cut the cable against the wall. And in an instant, the Prince was cut off from the exit by a massive door. The prince managed to react and even ran forward, but the pain in his leg greatly hindered him and soon it was too late. He leaned against the tightly closed door and stopped. And not even because he could not go further, but because of the realization of what was happening that collapsed on him. The prince wanted to shout something, but it didn't matter. He understood only one thing - he had been deceived, this time especially insidiously. That vision was indeed supposed to be a salvation, but he accepted it as a challenge and paid for it. Now it was clear why that Prince from the vision was so eager to break out of his imprisonment by opening this ill-fated door. And the Empress managed to deceive him so that he himself tried his best to get inside his dungeon - there was no way out of this place now, in any of the times. And now he was completely entangled in all the intricacies of what was happening.

Almost any of the assumptions that the Prince made turned out to be untrue. The Empress knew everything, and the Creature did not seem to have escaped her sight either. Apparently, it obeys it. Just like Dahaka, who appeared every time, as if on schedule, as soon as the Prince was in the present. The only strange thing was that the Prince met almost no open resistance. He hardly ever saw the Island's guards, and the Sword-wielding Creature did not try to fight him, except on the Watchtower Bridge. Could it be that the Empress needed strength now, since she was busy creating the Sands of Time, and confronting the Prince would only slow her down, forcing her to throw more and more soldiers into battle? It was much easier to create this illusion in order to cloud the Prince's mind and force him to fight his own imagination. And after all this, lock him in a trap, a kind of time loop, which will become his last refuge. An amazingly simple and insidious plan!

What can he do now? Not yet fully reconciled to his situation, the Prince searched every corner of the corridor of the hall with a portal, visiting, among other things, the present. He was looking for something, including a mechanism to control the door. But it was all to no avail - his worst fears were fully confirmed - the door was again locked on the back side. Maybe he should have stayed on the other side and then he would have been able to find another way out? It turns out that there was no backward running? Well, now he would have enough time to think things through.

But he already understood that on the other side of the door he was like in a dungeon - only in a more spacious and lighter, but just as hopeless one. And, in general, there was no difference at all - he was cut off from his goal by a locked door, and his mind could now do mental somersaults for as long as it wanted, deciding where the beginning of this place was and where its end was, but without achieving any significant success. Now the Prince understood why the sun did not move, not even because the two streams of time seemed to be fighting each other. Because the Prince himself did not know in which direction he was moving, and he was torn between the two options. All this time, he seemed to be standing still.

Returning to the past and exiting the portal, the Prince dejectedly approached the wall, turned his back to it, and sank to the floor. From a small hole above the Prince's head, Sand poured down measuredly, carried along the grooves on the floor into the sand whirlwind. Another similar hole was located on the opposite wall.

The prince gradually began to realize that in principle it did not even matter whether this place was at least partially real or not. And it is absolutely useless to try to comprehend the laws of this intricate illusion, this strange looped space, which is literally turned inside out, and time in it is a whirlpool, dragging you to the bottom, which suddenly turns out to be a saving surface – and so on ad infinitum. The only thing that could be important was what lay outside the boundaries of this place - this could be his last chance for salvation.

Looking at the flowing Sand, the Prince thought once again of the throne room - this was where he had been striving all this time. And it was there that he was not allowed to get in every possible way. Another closed door! But, on the other hand, he has been a prisoner of this place all these years - he is trying to escape from it, in the end! He is locked in this chamber one-on-one with the Hourglass, but unable to stop the creation of the Sands of Time. He's not even sure if he can touch them. He only walks in circles, watching how they count down the time to their birth grain by grain of sand. And his death. He felt himself to be one of those grains of sand inside the Clock; the only one who did not want to fall down, giving way to the others to the last. It seemed that now he began to understand what the

Empress was talking about: what it was like to be in two places at the same time. In his case, it was especially painful, because he was both a prisoner and not a prisoner, like a living dead, a second before the executioner's blow. It is strange that he manages to preserve his sanity at all – the human mind is simply not designed for such knowledge, it goes beyond all conceivable boundaries of ordinary consciousness. Its merging with the Sands does not pass without a trace: part of the mind dissolves in them, and they become part of this consciousness. Was he still himself? Has anything happened since that ill-fated night? What if he is simply doomed to see the same nightmare endlessly, and he himself is nothing more than a fragment of this memory? Part of the consciousness of the real Prince who is lost in the Sands. From the inside, through the glass, he saw himself, dagger in hand, determined to make the greatest mistake of his life. I saw a strange glint in those eyes - barely noticeable yellow sparkles. I saw how his skin was covered with a golden-gray hue, turning him into one of the monsters. He screamed, but to no avail – the other He was blind and deaf. As if someone else owned it at all. Black at heart, he was the embodiment of greed and madness. And no matter how many times the Prince saw this dream, it all ended in the same way: he received the freedom that he did not want and reunited with this body. Against his will, through burning pain and despair, he found himself locked in another dungeon.

His whole life was concentrated in this moment, so it is not surprising that he saw it constantly in his dreams and even in reality: the liberation of the Sands, the death of loved ones and the whole world, his own destruction, the desperate cry of Farah, which he did not hear then, but heard constantly all these years. He did his best to silence the memory, but the recent illusion of her voice had reawakened his long-forgotten feelings. Those who became hateful to him, who dragged him to the bottom.

What if he still doesn't hear something? Himself on the other side of the door that divided his consciousness. The prince stood and looked at himself sleeping and continued to think. What if sleep is the only place where he is still at least a little free? At least some part of it that wanders beyond the line of consciousness. He can't be in two places at the same time, but he can choose which of the two he should be in right now! And even if he is just a pale copy of himself, this may be enough to tie himself to the other half. Space separated them, but time was the bridge over which consciousness could cross to the other side!

The prince took a sharp and greedy breath and opened his eyes, looking around uncomprehendingly. He succeeded! Behind him, he saw the Sands-sealed doorway again, but this time he was on the other side of the Central Hall. Torn in half – apparently the Empress

had sent him in two directions at once (it turns out that he was the first to be subjected to this ordeal!) – he retained the ability to choose where to be at a particular time. His consciousness, rushing along the streams of Sand that flowed within the walls of the fortress, moved to the other half of the Prince, turning everything that had happened before into a foggy dream, the details of which slipped away like sand through his fingers. As if nothing had happened, not even this strange dream and the very transition from one body to another. He had always been there, from the beginning, and his strange journey through the blooming garden was only a vision, like a closed door from which he sought to escape. And only the touch of the locket, which the Prince found clenched in his fist, allowed him to save some fragments of memories.

The prince took a few steps, but he felt that he was not yet in full control of his body - his movements were uncertain and blurred. As if he imagined them in one way, and the body did them in a slightly different way. Apparently, these were the consequences of the transition of consciousness from one body to another and the fact that it was still divided. Maybe this half will be very lucky? There was nothing else to hope for.

The Prince remembered now what the Empress had said about the stranger: the other half of her was imprisoned in the Mechanical Tower. There he will go, armed, this time, with all his past experience - he already knows what the Empress is capable of, he has studied her techniques and the depth of cunning. But does she know about it? He could only hope that he didn't.

Chapter 16. Return

One day, somewhere between my (Jatta's) consciousness and hers, I suddenly felt something change. Another flash, but I saw it more with Jatta's consciousness: someone was rapidly approaching us, even though it was strictly forbidden. Jatta barked, and the image of the approaching man took on a negative connotation in her mind - either she understood it from my thoughts, or recognized him. She was good at distinguishing enemies from friends.

The intruder turned out to be Zulu, the head of security - he and Jatta had always disliked each other. She constantly growled in his presence, and he only looked haughtily and almost did not notice her. Apparently, she did not like his callousness and harshness, but these were the most suitable traits for a man whose task was to protect the whole island. And I knew that the person responsible for keeping anyone out of the Abyss wouldn't have come here just out of boredom, without important business. The ban didn't work for him, but he wouldn't have come unless he had to. Breaking free from the wonderful captivity of new sensations, I heard his words:

"There's a ship on the horizon, sir." He is approaching the Island.

"So what's the problem, won't you repel the attack on the approach to the shore?" I replied to him. "It's happened many times before!"

"He doesn't attack, and we don't need to fight him. This is your son's ship," Zulu said. "We are going to meet him to guide him safely among the rocks. Are you with us?

I don't know what awaits me ahead - Fate has given me a big surprise.

Namtar's Diary, Entry 39

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Nergal's ship was being swept away by the waves towards the rocks, one of the ridges on the distant approaches to the Island. It seemed that no one controlled him at all - he was left to himself. Some of the sails simply hung from the masts - the cables were not properly fastened. The ship would have been doomed if not for the timely arrival of a crew led by Zulu and Namtar. Their vessel was light and fast; In less than half an hour, they were able to safely approach those in distress. The sea was rough, the wind was stirring up the waves, and it was about to rain.

Namtar hid the diary in the inner pocket of his robes, and after a few minutes, he suddenly felt a growing excitement in him. A long-

forgotten feeling—it had been several years since Nergal had left this place—of his father's love stirred up in his soul. What if he died or there was no one on the ship at all, and he was simply brought into these waters? Why is there only one ship? After all, two people were going on the road. The bitterness of the parting was so unbearable that Namtar was not even interested in the fate of his son, suppressing any feelings in himself. He didn't think he'd ever be able to see it again.

Pulling themselves up with cables to the side of the ship, several more experienced sailors from the Zulu detachment climbed up. One of them rushed to the helm to save the ship from wreck. Others took care of the sails, and some found and dropped a rope ladder for the others, which Namtar, Zulu, and a few other soldiers climbed up.

They were ready to face an unknown threat - anyone could be on the ship, all this could be a trap at all. But Namtar felt a strange certainty that this was not the case. That Nergal is alive and on this ship. For the first time in a long time, Namtar experienced one even stranger feeling, which, under the circumstances, brought him joy: he did not know his fate, he did not see it in the Sands. The feeling of uncertainty gave hope, and not frightened, as it was before.

On deck, the crew found several bodies, as well as several survivors who were unconscious. Only one of those found by the team was showing obvious signs of life as he tried to crawl to the helm. When he saw those who arrived in time, he stopped and lay on his back. He seemed relieved.

Most of the people were familiar to the team in one way or another, which means that Namtar's hopes are not groundless! He rushed into the hold and found his son in one of the cabins. He lay almost unconscious, only emitting quiet moans and trembling. His body was engulfed in heat. He, like everyone else, was emaciated and close to death. But he's still alive!

***

Three years ago, when Nergal left his home island, he was determined, he felt a sense of adventure, and he was confident of a happy outcome to his journey. He was extremely relieved to leave what he believed to be a perishing place. His pride did not allow him to admit to himself that he still had warm feelings for his father. There were, of course, moments of doubt, but they quickly ran away like a morning fog.

During the entire time of his journey, no incidents happened - even the weather never brought surprises. Two ships went side by side, through the endless tablecloth of the ocean, somewhere beyond the horizon, towards the wildest and most impossible dreams. People

believed that they would find another land where death and decay did not rule. Where the water, year after year, does not wear down the stones, slowly eating the Island. And there will definitely be other people there.

Nergal and his crew reached new shores after two weeks of sailing. All this time, they followed the same direction, chosen almost at random, and the stars helped them to adhere to it. First they saw a few fishing boats, then a thick thicket along the shore, and then a small village. The locals who met them were afraid, but rather trembling and even reverent. They saw them almost as gods, with their wonderful ships and unusual clothes. And wherever they went, passing along the shore, the ships entered the mouth of the majestic river, they were greeted in the same way. People in these parts lived separately, in small settlements, fishing and gathering for a living, moving to a new place every six months.

Having found the most populated area, Nergal and his team went ashore and founded their settlement, which a year later was destined to become a real city. He and his team were unconditionally recognized by the lords of the city - after all, they gave so much knowledge and gifts to these people. They taught them agriculture, sheep breeding, and the construction of new, strong dwellings. They were taken for nothing more than messengers of heaven. Nergal and the others forgot about the Island - they were too carried away and pleased with the new life.

But this idyll did not last long. A little over a year later, rumors spread about savages coming from the north and destroying everything in their path. Heeding them, Nergal gathered and prepared an army, but was defeated - his enemy was too fierce and ruthless. Pale people, in coarse sheep skins, with always dirty faces and hair, they were not distinguished by any special talents in waging war. Except for one thing - unrestrained cruelty. Only a few survived their raids, and this could hardly be called luck - their life in captivity was full of deprivation, pain and fear. Sons died in front of their mothers, some were fed to wild animals - and all this for the amusement of savages. Nergal and some of his crew survived and were also captured. They were divided and broken. Someone literally begged for death, someone went crazy. The rest were consumed by impotent rage, thirst for revenge - cruelty begot cruelty. Nergal hatched plans for revenge day after day, wanting to personally cut the leader's throat. But he fought only with other prisoners, for leftovers. He and the others lost their human form, but the desire to punish the enemy did not diminish in him, preserving some part of his sanity. But along with hatred, fear grew in him - his former resolve faded, he almost gave up.

And so, one day, during the next transition from camp to camp, a year and a half after the captivity, he and several other people had a chance to escape. Realizing that he needed more men to lead at least one of the two ships (there was no other way to escape from the enemy), Nergal tracked down several more camps where members of his former crew were being held, and tricked them out. But he did not deceive the savages, but those people who ran away with him, but were not of his circle. He betrayed them, exchanging them for the people he needed, one to two. A day later, he found himself being chased. And for another week, he lived in constant fear and rage, trying to find his ships. Now Nergal was a completely different person, there was no turning back. Long captivity broke his will, his thirst for life, his determination and optimism. His soul became black as the ashes of a fire, he was gnawed by an unbearable sense of shame and doom.

His decision to return to the Island was not conscious, it was made as if secretly from himself. And it caused him nothing but anger - the only feeling of which he was capable. All the way back, the ocean was restless, and the weather changed from inclement to stormy, as if echoing his mood. The ship was tossed from wave to wave every now and then, and people were tormented by thirst and hunger. As it turned out a little later, some of them were terminally ill, having contracted something unknown from the savages. They sailed to certain death and were doomed. Only a miracle and providence helped them to reach the vicinity of the Island.

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Getting as close to the shore as possible, several soldiers from the Zulu detachment dragged the ladder and lowered it to the shore. There was no time to delay and, already on the way, having built an improvised stretcher from boards, the still living members of the crew began to be transported to the shore. One of the fastest members of the squad rushed for help.

Half an hour later, when help arrived and all the survivors had abandoned the ship, the squad, along with Zulu and Namtar, set off for the Abyss. There was no other way to help them – they were already on the verge of death and ordinary remedies would not do. Namtar understood that any prohibitions were meaningless now, and he did not hesitate to allow anyone who helped deliver the sick and wounded (as it turned out, there were some) to the Abyss.

Nergal was carried by Zulu and Namtar personally, and he would not have entrusted his son's life to anyone else at such a moment. On his orders, the stretcher was laid out around the balustrade surrounding the Abyss. Immediately after that, he asked

everyone to leave - their help was no longer needed, and the mystery of the Sands had to remain so for the time being. Only Jatta, who had joined them in the middle of the journey, remained nearby.

Nergal felt himself losing his mind, his mind fading, and he himself was drowning in the abyss of endless pain and despair. As if he had already died and passed on to another world. All the while, he was simultaneously burning with rage from within, literally saturated with hatred for the savages who had captured and killed half of his men. Until the very last moment that he was conscious, Nergal was determined to take revenge. Shackled by pain and anger, he would soon be completely lost in the darkness. She tore it apart like a hungry animal, but suddenly everything around was flooded with light, from which a familiar silhouette emerged. Nergal was unable to think sensibly and comprehend what was happening, but he instinctively reached for the figure. He suddenly felt incredibly relieved. Now his life was completely safe and nothing threatened her.

"You're home, my son," Namtar whispered faintly, leaning over him. His face dropped a grimace of pain as Nergal fell into a peaceful, healthy sleep for the first time in weeks.

When he finished, Namtar turned to Jatta in his mind: she was to bring Commander Zulu and a squad of his soldiers to carry the sick to the castle. All the ship's crew members were housed in barracks adjacent to the Watchtower, and Nergal was taken to one of the bedrooms in Namtar's chambers, where he spent most of his time working on books, a journal, and studying the Sands with his students. All of them needed a long rest to regain strength and regain consciousness. At the crucial moment when Namtar recaptured them from death, he saw that the diseases of some, including Nergal, were unknown to him, and even the Sands could not bring healing at once. It is a disease from the lands beyond the sea, cruel and deadly, but at the same time it took lives painfully slowly. And it was enough for one person to get sick with it, as well as the others. In addition, the travelers were exhausted by thirst, hunger, and seasickness. They were led by the finger of fate – there was no other way to explain their miraculous return!

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Constantly thinking about the health of his son, Namtar not only did not forget about the study of the Sands, but was engaged in it with a vengeance. He felt an extraordinary surge of strength in himself and worked day and night, wanting to ease his son's well-being, help him quickly come to his senses and establish a dialogue with him. At the same time, it would not be reasonable to transport

him to the Abyss and back several times every day – no rest for the patient. But in order to speed up his recovery, Namtar had to somehow maintain his contact with the Sands, a problem he had been pondering a few days earlier, before the ship's sudden arrival.

The decision ripened in him on the third day. For the first two, he had tried to somehow reach the locket by filling it with Sand, but it hadn't worked. The locket absorbed their power, as if taking a breath, which made all the sensations and visions that it gave become brighter. But only Namtar himself saw and felt them, because he was ready for it and knew what to expect. But at some point, he realized that the time had come to release the Sands from the Abyss, as he had discovered earlier that they were reluctantly following the locket. It was not enough to simply pull a small cloud from the bowels of the bowels and carry it to Nergal's chambers. The sands should be concentrated in one place, and not dispersed in the air, so at the direction of Namtar, a special small bowl was made, which he placed at the head of his bed. And so that the cloud of Sand that he had drawn with him would not dissipate, he placed the medallion at the bottom of the bowl, so that they would be attracted to him and settle at the bottom. By concentrating in one place, the Sands will have more power. Namtar called his invention the "Mirror of the Mind". According to his plan, any consciousness in the vicinity, regardless of the will of a person, will turn its gaze into this mirror and will be able to plunge into the Sands. To see one's reflection in it meant to be there, in another layer of reality, as if moving into this reflection. Although, of course, this sand bowl had nothing to do with real mirrors. But now Namtar could try to reach out to Nergal and lead him out of the darkness and into life. And, in addition, Namtar groped for another property of the Sands, which he had only guessed before: they could have a very real influence on time. Without them, even if saved, Nergal would have taken months to heal, but now it was a matter of days.

And the very next day, Namtar was successful – his idea worked. He saw, still faint, a blur of Nergal's consciousness that wandered in the world of the Sands. With every hour it grew stronger, and after a while, Namtar managed to communicate with his son for the first time in a long time. The last time he could remember, their conversation had ended in a break and Nergal's departure. Now, the son took a few steps towards his father, who was the first to start a dialogue:

"You are alive and under my protection. Under the protection of the whole of Usagggkar. Welcome home! Namtar said.

"I'm so weak... Is it definitely not the gate of death? Nergal replied in surprise. "Like in ancient legends.

"Legends lie. They are invented by people. Ordinary people whose minds are blind and fearful. You may not believe me, but listen to yourself! Your heart is still beating and you're clearly recovering. You will live, you are in the safe hands of fate," Namtar explained. "I lost Inanna and Ninninamash, this wound will never heal. But there's no way I'm going to lose you, I know that. I have seen the thread of fate, and it is favorable to me. And I will have enough strength to make all her predictions come true.

"They'll come, father!" One day they will come for us! Your confidence alone is not enough! They kill people like a disease and even faster. They will devour the Island, devour it like a piece of meat. I saw them, looked into their eyes. They...," Nergal babbled.

–Who are they? Namtar asked.

– They are fear. This is a burning thirst for revenge. They are the ones who turned my blood into rage, but powerless, causing me to destroy myself from within. I am not me, but only my shadow. Help me, father! Nergal pleaded.

"Sleep, son. You need to rest before you come to your senses and we can talk about it normally, a few more days will pass. May the outer peace give you inner peace," Namtar concluded and left.

Time after time, resuming the dialogue, Namtar saw how Nergal was torn apart by contradictions, but it seemed that the main line had been overcome - the wall of misunderstanding between them had been broken. Old grievances and disagreements are a thing of the past. Whoever the enemy Nergal spoke of, together they could defeat him, if he existed at all. But Namtar did not see the blind but suppressed rage that still possessed his son, as it seemed to retreat during their conversations, lost in unwanted memories that were like a reflection in a mirror.

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Nergal woke up a few days later and his health was improving rapidly. Soon he was able to walk on his own, speech stopped causing a sore throat, and one evening he came to Namtar himself, finding him working on a small book. Jatta lay at his feet. Nergal spoke first.

"You've really achieved a lot. My healing, this castle... I want to know everything!

"Well, perhaps we should pick up where we left off a few years ago," Namtar said.

"Are you waiting for an apology from me?" I think this is not important now. And what matters is whose side you are on. Or rather, will you accept me on yours? Nergal answered. "Or am I not worthy of it?"

Namtar, who had been sitting with his back to him all this time, turned and said:

"It is foolish to be offended by fate and those who act exactly as it predicts.

"Did you see all this beforehand?" Did you know that I would start not with thanks and apologies, but with demands? Well, then, forgive me, father, my stupidity and distrust. I see the power of your knowledge and the power of the Sands themselves," Nergal said with a smirk, but sincerely.

– It doesn't matter whether you believe in fate or not – it will not cease to be real, regardless of how you feel about it. She can deceive you, but you can't deceive her. But perhaps you are right about the most important thing - we are now on the same side," Namtar explained. "The only question is, who is our enemy you are talking about?"

"They are monsters from the depths of the ocean. They are the ocean itself! They pretend to be people, they are similar to them in everything. We woke them up, our ships disturbed their sleep, and they pursued us all this time. We ate raw fish, and drank rainwater. They managed to sink one of the ships - almost no one escaped. The ocean wants to swallow everything, bring everything back to its original form, you know? This island, it also looks like a huge ship that awaits a similar fate! Nergal said.

"And you haven't been able to find a single piece of land in the entire ocean?" Namtar asked, surprised. Obviously, if you have enemies, then it is better to have people from another island than the original elements.

–Nary. Are we the only ones? Or worse, are we the last? Nergal answered. "We only saw how in the distance the sky and the water surface closed into one line, wherever we looked. We miraculously managed to return here, to the Island... Wait, though, you're going to say it's fate too?

"Our destiny is to protect the Island from any threat, no matter what. And your, as you called it, accident is only a small step in the general plan of the universe," Namtar tried to soften his answer again. He understood what was going on in Nergal's soul and how hard it was for him to admit his mistakes.

Nergal nodded, and then there was silence.

– Where do we start? He asked, unable to endure the prolonged silence.

"I need to show you the Abyss again. Now your mind is ready to know and accept its power. But we need to take the locket - it is left in your chambers," Namtar said.

"Why is he there?" Was he the one who helped me hear your voice even in deep sleep? Nergal was surprised.

–Yes. Come, I'll show you what I've come up with to speed up your recovery and solve a few more problems at the same time," Namtar replied enthusiastically. He felt a surge of strength, knowing that now he had someone to fully share his knowledge and his heritage with. And its time.

On the way to Nergal's chambers, Namtar began to explain to his son what had happened to the castle and the Island as a whole. But almost immediately he stopped him, saying:

"I have a strange feeling, but I seem to know what you are talking about. While I was unconscious, I had dreams in which years passed me by and everything changed very quickly.

"Then you are ready for change yourself," Namtar put his hand into the bowl and took out a locket.

–What's it? Nergal asked, pointing to the cup.

– I call these bowls "mirrors of the mind" or simply "mirrors". Although so far there is only one and it is in front of you. I invented it to reach your consciousness while you were unconscious. There is some kind of connection between the Abyss and the Sand in this bowl, which allows us to communicate in the language of consciousness while being far apart. I struggled for weeks over a way to conduct such a dialogue, but Providence itself showed me the way," Namtar answered. In his voice you could hear pride in his achievements, although he tried to hide it so as not to irritate his son.

– How does it work? In general, in general. Sands... Do they somehow penetrate into your consciousness? Nergal asked.

– Not exactly. It is as if you open the door to your mind so that it can unite with the Sands into something unified. As if it were some kind of special form of vision," Namtar explained, adding: "And mirrors are just a small copy of the Abyss, which, in fact, is also a mirror in which your consciousness is reflected. And this very reflection is able to pass into a special layer of reality generated by the Sands.

"And what do you want to accomplish with them?" Nergal continued to ask.

"I've spent all these years searching. New knowledge and its better application. Somewhere in the distance, in the fog of fate, I see new people living in a world soaked in Sand. Living differently from us. And these bowls are only the first timid step towards this future," Namtar patiently explained. He was very pleased with his son's curiosity.

"Ah..." Nergal began to ask another question.

"I forgot to say that these mirrors helped me a lot in curing you of your illness. The sands open the way to some special form of interaction with people. Now that you're almost well, I'm going to use the cup to heal the others. She'll be taken to the barracks near the

Watchtower - people will come to her every day and their healing will be easier and faster," Namtar interrupted him.

"I see," Nergal replied. It seems that Namtar answered his unvoiced question.

Nergal walked over to the bowl and bent over it, gazing intently into the depths. It seemed to him that he even saw his reflection, pale, barely distinguishable, but still quite visible. He moved his hand over the surface of the mirror, and then lowered his hand into it. And the world around him stopped. It seemed that time stood still - all sounds died out, Namtar stood with his mouth slightly open and ready to say something. Only his own feelings turned into a turbulent ocean, enveloped in a storm, illuminated by thousands of lightnings and screaming by hundreds of voices. A pleasant chill crept up his arm, and his mind suddenly felt the full merging with the Sand that Namtar had been talking about.

"Father, I think I understand something," Nergal said in confusion.

"Then you must visit the Abyss and experience for yourself what it is capable of. And this was only a preparation for a real miracle. And for this, you don't even have to immerse yourself in it completely or with your hands. I'll teach you! Namtar replied enthusiastically.

And father and son went to the Abyss. On the way, Namtar found Zula and ordered the cup to be moved from Nergal's chambers to the Watchtower. He was going to go there after visiting the Abyss, alone or with his son. And even now Namtar began to think that one cup would not be enough - he needed to place them all over the castle!

All the way Nergal was silent, being impressed. He was surprised by the incredible strength he felt. One that would allow him to cope with even ten times as many savages.

Approaching the Abyss, Namtar spoke.

"This is the place where it all began. As soon as I threw the medallion into the abyss, a path I had never seen before. I have summoned the elements to serve my mind. And the locket is like a key, but it does not open the door, but beckons the Sands to itself. The abyss has been silent for generations because the ancients have forgotten the true power of the medallion.

"Allow me?" Nergal said, without taking his eyes off the Abyss.

–Of course! Here," Namtar said, handing the locket to his son.

Taking it in his hands, Nergal did not feel anything special. He even had a slight doubt - is it really imbued with some special power? The touch of the Sands in the bowl was far more convincing. But he decided to trust Namtar's words and reproduced the ritual already familiar to him. A whirlwind of sand still rose from the abyss and

engulfed Nergal, gradually plunging him into the very special layer of reality promised by Namtar.

"I see the time, father," Nergal said in surprise. "It flows through me, it changes me, it speaks to me. Can I drive it?

"We have a lot to learn together. I myself know so much and at the same time so little. But you certainly see the thread of fate that I have been saying from the beginning. I will teach you how to read it with the Ring that I created. Sands seem to be able to penetrate objects, giving them special properties. As we get to know them better, we'll surely be able to come up with many more great uses for them.

Nergal was as fascinated by the Sands as Namtar had been. He saw many incredible things, but he could hardly understand them. He will undoubtedly need help to figure everything out. When he had finished, he and his father separated: Namtar went to the Watchtower to attend to the sick, and Nergal went to his chambers, saying:

"I need a few days to think it over. I'll find you myself.

"Good," Namtar replied, rejoicing in his heart that things had finally moved forward.

The very next day, Nergal found his father while he was treating other survivors at the Watchtower. His eyes burned with enthusiasm, and a smile shone on his face - he was full of determination. Approaching Namtar, he said:

–I am ready. Let me start right now and watch you work. I long to touch the Sands and comprehend the depths of this knowledge!

Namtar didn't even have to answer - he was waiting for this moment so much! He just nodded slowly and continued his work.

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In the evening, when it was time to rest, Nergal's interest still did not fade, and he asked Namtar:

"What kind of book do you write every day?"

"This is my diary, in which I briefly record my thoughts and discoveries about the Sands," Namtar replied to him.

"Will I allow me to read it?" Maybe this will help me understand everything better. I can do it even at night when you don't need it! Nergal asked.

"I'll teach you everything myself, it'll probably be even faster." This diary is for future generations, to keep all the lost secrets and help me avoid my mistakes," Namtar replied to him, who did not really want his son to see anything written about him. After all, all this was already in the past. "We'll start tomorrow, go and have a good rest."

After a moment's hesitation, Nergal left Namtar's room and went to his room.

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It had been about six months since Nergal had devoted himself entirely to the study of the Sands with Namtar. He realized that he was wrong about them. The stubborn Nergal would hardly have admitted it out loud, but all his actions screamed about it. He quickly lost interest in his father's diary—after all, it was just dry letters.

He turned out to be a very capable student. In addition, Namtar trusted him very much and, seeing his success, allowed him to treat his team. Nergal mastered this skill in just a week! The only thing he still resisted was faith in fate. But if that had once been a stumbling block, Nergal now regarded Namtar's views as some kind of fad or mere delusion. And this difference in views did not interfere with their joint work in any way, even in spite of the sometimes heated discussions. Still, Nergal carefully studied the capabilities of the Ring of Fate created by Namtar. He had peered many times into the whirlwind of glowing symbols scattered across the ceiling of the rotunda above the Abyss, and studied the past and the future. Time after time, he found only confirmation of his beliefs, but he believed that it still allowed him to expand his horizons and learn to feel the Sands better.

Nergal saw how weak the items imbued with the power of the Sands were compared to themselves. The things created or found by Namtar are only a pale shadow of their power. He did not leave the thought that something had to be done about it, it was necessary to find some solution. Nergal devoted a lot of time to mirrors - over time, there were more of them, they were placed throughout the castle. Sometimes he studied them with Namtar, but soon he even surpassed his father in understanding their nature. Realizing this, Namtar gave his son complete freedom, concentrating on other tasks. Nergal soon discovered a couple of surprising properties of mirror bowls. Firstly, the people who touched them retained a mental connection with the Sands for some time, were able to remain in this layer of reality. And secondly, they were able to carry a person between two separated mirrors – it seemed to some that they continued to be in a real body, but in a different place. However, both of these phenomena were very short-lived, and the conclusion suggested itself that these bowls needed strengthening. Extending their validity period could open up many new possibilities.

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The return of his son had a particularly favorable effect on Namtar himself. Despite a long and deep misunderstanding, they were able to find something that gave them both strength, inspired and captivated them. It was the best possible scenario, and now Namtar understood why he had not been able to see it beforehand—such truly great events in life required the same broad, all-encompassing view. He was no longer so dry and strict in his judgments. His mind was no longer focused on knowledge alone, and his heart blossomed along with the flowers in the abandoned garden. And in his diary he wrote only a brief:

Instead of the vast seas and the abyss of misunderstanding that separated us, now our friendship is growing stronger. The abyss no longer divides us, but brings us closer.

Namtar's life was now truly filled with meaning, he was grateful to fate, despite all its treachery. He continued the construction of new parts of the castle, erected a shipyard and laid a canal for transporting ships to the sea. But he understood that in addition to important and practical things, he needed something else. The idea of something beautiful matured in his soul and one day all the details of the mosaic came together. Namtar realized that he had to revive and ennoble the ancient abandoned garden. It will become the soul of the castle, and then withering will finally be replaced by flowering. And as soon as he realized this, he gave the order to start work, personally supervising every detail and not shy away from dirty work.

He decided to create a garden many times larger and more beautiful than before, in honor of Nergal's return. He installed fountains, arranged multi-tiered plantings, and arranged places for growing fruits and vegetables. Canals and aqueducts stretched to the farthest corner of the garden, carrying water to every flower and blade of grass. *from the Sumerian "ninninnamaš" – "bird"*], who held jugs with water pouring from them on their shoulders. This will not bring them back to life, but it will prolong the memory of them. And he will restore peace to Namtar's heart.

The garden was filled with extraordinary aromas and caused trembling delight in anyone who came here. Namtar was especially proud of this work, as if he had done something real for the first time in his life, and often brought his son here, hoping that he would share his joy and delight. But he reacted somewhat coolly to the Garden. He noted the beauty and sensuality of the statues, expressing gratitude to his father for the bright memory of his mother and sister. But he still preferred to spend more time with the Sands.

One day, Namtar found Nergal, Zulu, and some volunteers (Nergal had his own students) near one of the bowls and took his son

aside. A small but important conversation took place between them, which dispelled all Namtar's doubts and fears:

– Isn't a new wall of misunderstanding growing between us? Namtar asked, adding, "It's as if you're moving away from me. Again.

"You and I are different, it's true. But think about it, is it so bad? We do what we do best, at least for now. You were the castle and the beautiful Garden, and I was the Sands, who needed a fresh look. But our goal is the same – we want to transform the Island. We are complementary to each other. And so are our deeds," Nergal replied in detail.

After thinking about his words for a moment, Namtar answered:

"I think I understand what you mean. I have seen it in my dreams, and now I understand their meaning. I saw not my reflection in the Sands, but you! Back then, the vision was barely discernible, elusively subtle, but it made it possible to preserve the connection between us.

A faint smile appeared on his face.

"You taught me everything you knew. I am immensely grateful to you, and let me repay you in kind," said Nergal.

"You've saved me and my soul anyway. Do you remember the day you returned to the Island? Yes, it was I who saved you, snatching you from the clutches of the storm. But this day turned out to be something more," Namtar said frankly.

"I hardly remember anything from those days. I don't remember my trip - it's in the past and that's where it belongs," Nergal replied, shrugging his shoulders. "Only the formidable ocean and its boundless cruelty sometimes dream of me at night.

"It's a pity that we can't turn back the clock and correct the mistakes of the past," Namtar said with sadness in his voice.

"You're wrong here, father. I discovered an amazing property of the Sands - they allow you to transfer consciousness back in time, endowing the past with new thoughts and knowledge," Nergal objected triumphantly in his voice.

"But what about fate?" It is indisputable, and you propose to change it? It's impossible! Namtar replied in surprise.

– Time and fate are part of a single whole. A contradictory, but inseparable flow. All that remains is to become a part of it," Nergal continued. "A little more and we will make a breakthrough, the boundaries of time will be expanded!" But these mirrors do not yet have enough power for something more.

Namtar refused to believe what he had heard, but somewhere deep inside he was beginning to realize that Nergal was right. All this time, he did not see the big picture, but his son's fresh look really allowed him to dig deeper and turn all ideas about the Sands upside down in a second.

"I know what to do," Namtar replied simply.

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Realizing that he was really a petty thinker, Namtar decided to radically solve the issue of rapprochement between the Sands and the inhabitants of the castle, and then the entire Island. He replicated the network of in-wall channels used for water, and created a similar one for the Sands, piercing the entire castle with them. Thousands of streams of Sands streamed through its walls, filling it with their power. Millions of grains of sand ran through them like blood through their veins, turning the castle into a living organism. How foolish it was to give the power of the Sands to just one small object when you could fill an entire castle with them! In this case, all these mirrors and other nonsense became unnecessary. Only the Abyss, as an eternal source of this power and a huge castle saturated with it. And the next step will be the entire Island! And then everyone will be able to join the mystery of the Sands, uniting their consciousness with them. And prosperity will change... Namtar could not find a word that would succinctly describe the next stage of the Island's transformation. To do this, he will need a special manifesto that will depict the image of a bright, happy future. For people who do not yet know how to read fate and have not known its power, this manifesto will be much clearer. It should be brief and accessible, and the future described in it should be bright and desirable. Catching this idea, Namtar decided that he should think everything through well and work it out - there was no need to rush with such a responsible matter. The Manifesto, or as he called it "Dilmun" (a word he found in an ancient book that literally meant "important statement") should be the most important element of the future of the Island, its cornerstone.

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Unlike the water that ran down the mountains in rivers, the Sands flowed through the canals of the castle in a different way. All the streams were closed circles generated by the Abyss. They rushed out of it and pulled a kind of "tail" behind them, and, having passed the circle, returned to the source. And everything repeated again. A closed, self-sustaining and self-sufficient system with inexhaustible energy. An impossible miracle that has become a reality.

Namtar looked at fate differently now. If before he considered it strict and straightforward, now it reminded him of the same rings, intertwined with each other into a single, unbreakable chain. But at the same time, he was free to move along them like Sand, as if

constantly pulling himself forward and catching up with him behind. The change of fate was a part of it, a deeper layer that also changed the person himself, because his consciousness is also a part of it. And without going through this strange path, without changing your mind, it was impossible to read fate to the end correctly, correctly interpreting all the signs. Any interaction with her changed her, leading her to her true appearance. And it changed the person himself, he was no longer what he was before. And he must trust her to the end, even if she literally leads him into the abyss - he has already managed to make sure of this.

Time would pass, Namtar decided, and Nergal would learn the depth and complexity of the force of fate. It is something that cannot be known without immersing oneself with oneself. But Nergal was right about something, looking at the Sands more broadly and considering their real driving force - time. What he told Namtar was fully confirmed and incredibly impressed by him. However, the power of small mirrors was really not enough. And even if you consider the Abyss as a large mirror bowl, its power was not enough to pass through time. But Namtar had one grand idea, filling the castle with Sands was only the first step.

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Time passed, and the magic of the Sands permeated and transformed the castle. At any point of it, the air had a faint golden hue—Sand was everywhere. It hung in the air, rustled measuredly in the walls and, in addition, changed the people themselves. Everyone, even those who were far from the teachings of Namtar and Nergal and from the Sands in general. Their consciousness changed and rebuilt, they became more purposeful and thoughtful. They were imbued with the same ideas that the Namtar once had and took them with them to their settlements. But Namtar wished for more, for the Sand to permeate the entire Island, every stone, and even the air. The abyss only grew more powerful every day, like a huge fire that was burning stronger and stronger.

And one day, Namtar finally understood what he had to do. He almost repeated the old mistake, marking time, but fate itself showed him the way. His manifesto, his most important and powerful statement, was the castle itself! Not a pitiful piece of paper with words written on it, whatever they were, but a real miracle that could be seen from any inhabited point of the Island. He was a symbol of change, striving for the best. And at the same time, he remained alive, real – it was obvious to everyone how he changed everything around him. And it does not even matter who was its head - Namtar himself, or Nergal, who will take his place after the death of his

father. And so he named the castle Dilmun, presenting it to the inhabitants of the Island from a new angle.

"This day marks the beginning of a new era!" he said to the crowd.

And the Sands amplified his words and their meaning a hundredfold in the language of consciousness, which was now accessible to everyone, at least at the level of some implicit deep sensations. Which have yet to become something more, perhaps even in a few generations. But the walls of Dilmun already towered over the Island, and every day it became more beautiful and more inspiring to people. They were free to come to it, walk through the Garden, and even look into the Abyss, and Namtar even took this risky step, ahead of time and hurrying fate. Although, of course, many things were still not fully understood by the inhabitants of the Island, turning their attitude into more religious awe. And only a rare guest was not shy in front of the Abyss - it had been shrouded in mystery for too long.

Not wanting to turn Dilmun into a meaningless idol like those worshipped by people in ancient times, Namtar wanted to constantly change and develop it. Dilmun did not end where its walls towered. And near the largest settlement of the Island, the construction of two tall Watchtowers was begun, towering over the Island and looking into the distance - the idea was given to him by Nergal, reminding him of the mysterious enemy, whose invasion he still feared. The towers themselves, at first secretly, and then quite openly, were the outlets of the channels for the Sand that flowed into this part of the Island. This step turned the Island and the castle into something indivisible, into a single whole. Namtar understood the essence of his creation right in the process of transformation. His manifesto, Dilmun, is now the whole Island, and not a pile of stones piled up in a beautiful castle. The new name was a matter of time, a short-term prospect. And, in order to preserve continuity, Namtar decided to create a symbol of Dilmun Island, which would absorb the former name, Usaggigark, which meant either "black mountain" or "black head", derived from some even older name. Taking the ink and the very first page of his diary, Namtar wrote the word "mountain" in large size, which looked like three triangles, one at the top and two at the base, all turned with a single tip to the bottom. Then he drew a circle around them, making the line very wide, and two smaller circles at the bottom. They marked the Island itself, the outer wall, and the two Watchtowers that guarded the Island from the most vulnerable, southern side. And the crown of the symbol was another inverted triangle, larger, symbolizing the Abyss, which gave the Isle of Sand and hope for the future, changing its life forever. After a moment's thought, he added the final touch, drawing a wide strip

down from the upper triangle, pointed to the bottom, such as the Sands that flowed along the walls of the castle and spread throughout the Island.

By the time the symbol moved to the vertically elongated banners of yellow and golden color, it acquired a more elongated outline - the triangles of the word "mountain" ceased to be equilateral, and the stripe in the center went beyond the circle. In a sense, Namtar returned to the original idea, creating a kind of manifesto. But this symbol would be nothing, an absolute dummy, if it were not for the castle itself in its current form.

Over time, this symbol was reproduced above the exit from the hall where the Abyss was now located. From the two rings symbolizing the towers, Sand flowed, falling back into the Abyss that gave birth to it - the circle was closed. The hall itself had lost its ancient rotunda, and now the surface for the symbols by which Namtar read fate was the huge domed ceiling of the new hall. The outlines of the past were erased everywhere, everything became different.

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The only thing that bothered Namtar was his dreams. It seemed to him that Nergal's anxiety about the formidable ocean and the unknown enemy he could not properly describe, referring to the state in which he was. Together, they tried many times to find at least some fragments of memories or hints in the depths of Nergal's mind, but they did not succeed. A sheer fog and incomprehensible, gloomy images that now penetrated into Namtar's dreams. But they would have remained dreams if he had not begun to see bad signs in the thread of fate. Namtar couldn't find an explanation for them, they were just as blurry and hazy. What can it be? They have always managed to repel any attacks on the Island - why should anything go wrong this time? Namtar ordered the garrison to be doubled, gave Zul special powers, and asked Nergal to keep a close eye on his assignments. He himself concentrated on the speedy spread of Peski in the surrounding lands.

And so, when his project was almost completed, and Namtar even felt a little relieved – his anxiety receded, along with his restless dreams – something terrible happened. The ocean woke up, the earth trembled and part of the Island went underground, dividing it into two halves. The elements themselves were against Namtar and his creation, waking up from eternal sleep and showing their true nature. First, all the lowlands and wastelands between the castle and the Watchtowers were flooded, and then the water came close to the castle walls on one side and the human settlements on the other.

Over time, the water increased, and the flooded areas went deeper and deeper, until one day they finally disappeared from sight, under the thickness of ocean water.

Now the Island consisted of two parts - the outer ring, which was not completely closed and resembled a crescent in shape, and the central part - a mountain growing directly from the water on which the castle was located. Now it was especially vulnerable - using the strait in the outer ring, it became possible to bring ships directly to its walls. On Nergal's advice, it was urgently turned into a fortress - impregnable, with high sheer walls. Many exits were blocked, and the walls of the castle were remade in such a way that it was possible to conduct a defensive battle with the enemy. For a while, Namtaru had to come to terms with the fact that his brainchild had lost its appearance. The name invented by him, although it stuck, has lost its power and meaning. The castle was also damaged from the inside, collapsing in places and even collapsing. It was not easy for the rest of the inhabitants of the Island, outside the castle. Crops and animals died, settlements were destroyed or flooded. The feeling of fear and insecurity settled in their hearts again. And in addition to him, there is distrust of Namtar, fear of his ideas and experiments.

Namtar spent all day in thought. He understood that now people were losing contact with the Sands and a shadow of doubt fell on their thoughts. And even he himself tried to revise his views and ideas – he was so deeply shocked. He was looking for at least some explanation for what had happened and a way to solve the problem. Namtar turned out to be just a small powerless person on the battlefield of two powerful elements. The ocean sought to devour everything that it once gave birth to. And Namtaru now can only adapt to the new reality. It was she who was hiding behind a fog of vague visions and signs of fate, which he did not have time to decipher in time.

At some point, Namtar suddenly realized that he was looking for a solution in the wrong place. It was enough just to look at the medallion a little more carefully - the relief on it exactly repeated the new shape of the Island! The clearest sign he had ever seen, but understood too late its meaning. But, strange as it may seem, this gave him hope - Namtar still had one unrealized idea, the success of which could be the salvation of the Island. But then he conferred with Nergal and they came to the conclusion that they could not rely on one idea alone, and they definitely needed a backup plan. The battle for the minds of people was not yet lost, Nergal believed.

"What if we discard all intermediate steps and soak people's bodies with the Sands directly?" he suggested. "I saw it in the line of fate. It seems that I have seen the light!

Chapter 17. Mech Tower

My worst fears about water were confirmed... This is a sleepy but dangerous element. Now I understood what Nergal had warned me about. And, I'm afraid, this is just the beginning - it can only get worse in the future. What if the whole of Dilmun went under water? I must use the full power of the Sands, every opportunity they provide, to prevent this!

First of all, from now on I keep all records only with special indelible ink. And this applies not only to this diary, but to all the books of my school. I do not want to be erased from history and I will not allow the destruction of everything that I have achieved with such difficulty!

Secondly, I am redoubling my efforts to spread the Sand throughout the Island - their power will now withstand the insidious elements, and not just serve as a source of knowledge, a means of communication or divination of Fate.

And finally, I'm going to drive the water back. Nergal and I have been studying the nature of the Sands for a long time, and we have discovered their truly miraculous ability! The force before which any element will retreat. If at first the Sands only allowed us to see fragments in the fog of the future, now we know that they are able to make Time itself part. You just need to collect a huge amount of Sand in one place, concentrate it almost in one point, and then their power will multiply so much that the rivers will flow backwards!

I ordered a special hall to be set up, where an incredible amount of Sand flocked. In its center, on the floor, these streams converged at one point, concentrating in it and acquiring a special power. I had done something similar before, creating mirror bowls, but then I did not understand the full hidden power of my creation. And to summon the Sands to this point, it was enough to use the medallion they always strive for. After that, the Sands swirl into a vortex that takes you into the past or future.

It's time to change something else. The name "Sands of Destiny" was inaccurate and too one-sided. From now on, I call them the Sands of Time! They are like an arrow that pierces the past, present and future. They allow you to see everything in advance, speed up the search for answers to any questions a thousand times over, and allow you to control the passage of time. touching the locket, and the obstacles will disappear. I will go back in time and correct my mistakes! ***You should never give up as long as there is an opportunity to fix them!***

Namtar's Journal, Entry 47

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After a few minutes, the Prince's movements became more confident and precise. He felt the strength to move forward again, desperately seeking salvation in the labyrinths of time. He clearly felt that his mind was now almost clear - he did not feel the influence of the Empress. She left the Prince, stopped confusing his thoughts and confusing him in every possible way. Did she really back down? Unlikely. Apparently, she had something else in store for him, perhaps even a more severe test. The vision, of course, was the work of her hands - it could not have been so real and alive if it had been an ordinary dream.

The prince was delighted to find that his leg no longer hurt and he could walk confidently, and even run if necessary. This, coupled with the silence in his head, calmed and encouraged him. But it didn't last long - thoughts again clouded his mind like clouds in the sky on a gloomy day. Yes, it was easier for him to consider everything that happened in the Garden as a vision, an illusion. The door behind which he was locked and miraculously found a way out. But, apart from the fact that the pain in his leg had subsided, he had no solid evidence of it. Most likely, his other guess is correct: the Empress subjected him to division. And he didn't seem to have gone mad yet just because he had a locket that she didn't know about! He should guard it, keeping his possession of it secret, for it is only because of his mysterious power that he is still a whole person. The medallion gives him the ability to be in one of the two defective bodies at any given time. Thus, he breaks the insidious plan of the Empress, who wants to tear his mind in two, causing both halves of it to go crazy. And, perhaps, lock him in one time - he will cease to feel its move, as it already happened to him in the Garden. But, if the medallion gives him such advantages, then where is it really? Or rather, when? In which of the times? Where did he go first - to the Garden or the Mechanical Tower? Or does it happen at the same time?

His thoughts were abruptly interrupted by a conversation between the two guards in front of him, who were standing in front of him, at the exit of the next corridor. Or rather, it was more like a rare exchange of monosyllabic phrases (the Prince almost did not understand their meaning, but they were short and emotionless). However, the Prince noted that the Empress's soldiers were very different from the monsters he had encountered in Azad. But, rather, not in appearance, but in behavior. They were much smarter, acted in an organized way and even communicated with each other. They were not the product of the raging storm of the Sands that swept away all life in its path when the Prince opened the Clock. Obviously,

the Empress controlled this process and created warriors who could be really useful, in some ways even remotely resembling humans.

The prince drew his sword and, still undetected, rushed at his enemies. Attacking from behind gave him the advantage of the first strike. He had no time for honor now, especially since he knew that none of the monsters would bother to play by the rules. Running as far as he could, the Prince jumped on the back of one of the soldiers and, pushing off, swung over him, simultaneously turning in the air and delivering a deadly blow. Blood sprayed onto the wall, and the monster's body was almost instantly engulfed in a golden cloud of Sand, which gradually engulfed it. In those few seconds, the Prince lost his advantage, and all he could hope for was his own reaction and dexterity. He crouched, passing the second guard's sword over his head - he had time to react and was already attacking the Prince. Without allowing the soldier to take his hand back, the Prince stood up, grabbed it, and, turning his back on the enemy, threw him over him. He rolled over, and before he could pick up the fallen weapon, he saw the Prince rushing towards him with a predatory throw with his sword raised above his head. The blow landed exactly in the chest, despite the monster's attempt to defend itself and throw the Prince aside. This time, death engulfed the enemy's body a little more slowly - first blood flowed, then the skin turned a golden-gray hue, and only after that the Sand swallowed the body. All this time, the monster was no longer able to resist. His movements spoke of slow agony.

Soon, three more guards arrived at the noise. They looked very similar to the two already killed by the Prince and the ones he encountered in the sea and at the entrance to the fortress - faceless monsters in bone masks made of animal skulls. The prince, inflamed by the battle, as if he missed a real sword fight, instead of wandering in the corridors of time and his own mind, rushed at them. The language of battle was the very dialect in which he could speak truly gracefully and eloquently. It was understandable to anyone, and there was no barrier to such a conversation - now it was more appropriate than ever.

Before the next throw, the Prince grabbed a dagger left by one of the monsters from the floor and, dodging the blow with the axe, dived behind his opponent's back and plunged the dagger into his neck, a little to the side. The wound was shallow, so the Prince pulled out the dagger, sprinkling the wall with blood again, wrapping his other hand around the enemy's neck and making it impossible for him to move, and plunged the dagger into the enemy's chest. All this time, he had his back to the second guard, who was about to impale the Prince. But, in fact, he did not let his guard down - it was only a deception. The prince turned sharply at the right moment, putting

the soldier in front of him, whom he was holding with his left hand and the blade entered his stomach. This time, the wound was fatal.

Somewhere in the distance, there was a low, thud as if a boulder had struck the ground and rolled off a cliff. The blow was so strong that the walls shook for a moment.

The second guard shouted to the third:

"Warn the others!"

Moments later, the Prince threw the sword from his left hand to his right hand and, with a face full of anger, cut off the second guard's head. The prince had done this before, but this time he noticed that the blood did not rush out of the soldier's neck, but only slowly flowed out until the Sand swallowed the whole body. But despite his enthusiasm for the battle, the Prince managed to make out the words of the guard he had just killed and, fearing to make a noise and attract new enemy troops, hastened to grab an axe dropped by one of the enemies. A moment later, he threw it, smashing the skull of the fleeing soldier, and his body rolled down the stairs that skirted the cliff at the exit from the corridor.

The journey to the Mechanical Tower promised to be much more interesting and eventful than a harmless walk through the Garden. And, apparently, this was only the beginning, the prelude to the real battle. The Empress apparently decided to change tactics, having failed to cloud the Prince's mind. In the Garden, he had met no enemies except Dahaki and the Thing, and now she seemed to be unleashing all her might on him.

The prince, instinctively clutching his sword in his hand, slowly approached the exit and peeked around the corner. There was no one nearby, but the staircase rested on a huge closed stone door that opened from the inside. It was tall and looked incredibly massive – what force could lift it? After examining it, the Prince realized that he would not be able to get to the other side. He didn't even have anything to cling to. To his right stood a sheer cliff, and to his left a yawning abyss, at the bottom of which the waves beat against the rocks. Turning around, he suddenly saw an inconspicuous passage on the side of the exit. The rays of the sun fell on it so bizarrely that it practically merged with the rock. At the same time, the Prince noticed that the sun was not located where it had been during his wanderings in the Garden - the time was only approaching noon.

He chuckled as he thought, "Is that all? To lead me astray, you need something more serious."

The passage apparently led to a balcony carved directly out of the rock and hanging over the Prince unreachably. From there, most likely, came the help that the Prince had just dispatched. And as he thought about it, he heard the hurried sound of footsteps from somewhere above.

"Again?" thought the Prince. He understood that he could fight for hours with the Empress's soldiers and always come out victorious in their battle. What does she want? Wear him out? Or...

The Prince felt dizzy for a second, he felt like someone else for a moment. Very similar to himself, but with different memories. Slippery and foggy – he could not grasp them, they flowed like sand through his fingers, leaving a strange feeling of anxiety. The feeling that he is doing something wrong is not in vain, but in the wrong way. But what exactly and how is it correct then?

His main mistake was that he was still playing by the rules of the Empress, and in spite of his escape from one vision, he had gradually become bogged down in another. She had deliberately stalled for time and confused him, and now she was distracting him with constant battles. He should, in spite of everything, hurry to find the stranger. She is still the only one who can shed light on what is happening.

Without hesitation, the Prince dealt with a couple of more guards, one of whom he simply threw off a cliff. No matter what fate awaited him after the fall, he was no longer a hindrance to the Prince, who rushed up to the balcony. From it, he expected to get to the other side of the closed door.

The balcony was a watchpoint, which offered an excellent view of the entire area around. In addition, it could serve as a fortification in order to hold the defense during a siege. Therefore, the Tower was something very important for the Empress and the entire fortress.

From here, from above, the Prince could finally get a good look at the Tower itself, having only seen its top, lost in the mist that slid down the mountain. Now he saw that behind the door was a courtyard, bounded on one side by a chasm, and on the other by a stone wall, with mechanisms set on it, driven by streams of water. Some of these streams rushed through special channels directly into the abyss. At the far end of the courtyard was another massive door blocking the entrance to the Tower. From here, the Prince could not determine whether he would be able to overcome it, but he had no choice: at this moment, the Empress was working on the creation of the Sands of Time, and it was very close to completion. His whole fate is drawn into one point, so small that it is impossible to see anything in it. Everything will be decided by seconds, tiny moments.

From the direction of the Tower, I could hear the creaking of wood, the clang of chains, and all this was mixed with the roar of the streams of water. The prince was aware of the destructive effect of water on the Sands, and wondered how miraculously they coexisted in this fortress, serving a common purpose. The energy of water drives all mechanisms, controls doors and who knows what else. But these actions are monotonous and predictable, repeated day after

day. The sands fill this place with some kind of special life, creating a different, different from the usual reality. And these powerful elements seem to dance around each other, but without touching.

The prince carefully climbed over the railing of the balcony and, after one precise jump, found himself on the wall that propped up the mighty door, after which he hurried down. The wall was high, but it's still not the same thing to climb up and jump down. Rolling over, the Prince jumped slightly and, rising to his feet, immediately grabbed his weapon. He was sure that when he looked around the yard from the balcony, he did not see anyone, it was empty. And he remained so when he moved to the wall. But as soon as he jumped down and let him out of sight for a second, another squad of guards appeared from nowhere, the same ones in ugly stone masks. The prince had previously believed that it was relatively easy to deal with them, he did not even need a dagger, as he had done in Azad. These monsters were a little different, there was something human about them. But, rather, only in their bodies, and not in consciousness. True, now the Prince thought that they were not as simple as it seemed at first glance. It is as if two new ones come to replace one fallen one.

This time there were six of them. The prince did not dare to rush into battle at once, not because he was afraid of a fight. He ceased to understand what this could lead to. Previously, victory in battle had always been clear to him, but now he feared that he could only make things worse. But he had no choice - the sand soldiers surrounded him and attacked simultaneously from all sides.

This time they approached slowly, as if cautiously. Though the Prince hadn't noticed before that they might be familiar with fear. That orange light that burned in their eyes drowned out the pain and sense of danger. In that case, what was it? Waiting? But what? That he will make a mistake? Or something like curiosity? What if they were the eyes and ears of the Empress, and she was the one watching him now?

And suddenly the Prince heard the familiar disgusting laughter of Shadi, who, having calmed down, said:

"Are you going to wait for them to kill you?" Or should I do it myself?

The prince turned his head and saw her, safe and sound again. The last time they met, he hadn't had time to figure out if she was still alive or if it was just an illusion. And if earlier he was inclined to the second version, now he began to doubt, after everything that he encountered. But he wasn't going to waste time thinking, he wanted to find out what her words were worth as soon as possible. If necessary, he will kill her again. And then again and again. Anything to get her out of your way, at least for a while. Maybe it's because he doesn't have a dagger?

The prince felt a surge of rage, wild and irrepressible. An animal anger that weighed down his breathing and throbbed like a vein on his cheekbone and temple. "Kill! Destroy!" he thought. And suddenly he felt that in addition to his own rage, something else was awakening in him, filling him with energy and strength unknown to him before. His body was no longer fully his, and his anger was literally clouding his vision, putting his life in danger. His face was contorted into a grimace of anger that he was about to unleash on his enemies, and especially on her. At some point, his body trembled, and then seemed to shrink into a ball. He felt a cold burning sensation on his chest and literally in a second, a sand whirlwind rushed in all directions from the Prince, which like an explosion scattered the enemies in different directions with great force. A moment later, they were gone, only a weapon lying nearby reminded them of their recent presence. The Prince himself felt that the medallion seemed to be saturated with the Sand with which the bodies of the soldiers were soaked. He himself liked this feeling of uncontrollable power, that in one mad rush she burst out of him and instantly dealt with the enemies around him. A predatory smile lit up on his face and, succumbing to this new feeling, he rushed to Shadi, intending to destroy her as well.

The prince did not know whether she understood what had just happened, or whether she knew about the locket—oh, how valuable it was! But he saw her face change as he struck down six of them in one fell swoop. Exactly how he did it!

"Now you can't leave!" The Prince shouted to her a second before the blow.

A blow that only sliced through the air - his sword did not feel the flesh. Illusion! This is still a deception! Did the Empress not have a more powerful means to leave him? Falling awkwardly, slipping in a puddle, the Prince hurried to get up and turned to the place where she was still standing, grinning at him again. The prince stopped for a moment, breathing heavily and not knowing what exactly he should do next. Suddenly he felt dizzy for a moment, as if he had seen the next few seconds before they came. I heard Shadi say something to him again and his body suddenly lifted something into the air and squeezed like a giant hand. Not knowing exactly why, the Prince ducked and jumped to the side, dodging what was about to grab him. Once again, Shadi's face lit up with surprise for a moment.

The prince heard heavy massive footsteps at his side, then a moment of silence, during which a huge shadow fell on him - a giant monster, which he could not see from the bright sun, jumped at him from the wall. Upon landing, it tried to grab the Prince with a huge hand, but he was far enough. Did the locket really help him see the future? But the Prince did not understand how and at what moments

he could use his power. As if he himself decided when the Prince needed it and when he didn't.

In front of the Prince stood a real giant, with a stocky body, not looking like a man. He was, like all other monsters, covered in gray-golden skin, most of which was protected by thick armor that seemed to grow into his body. At the same time, it was very, even excessively, muscular. The prince had heard legends about golems, giant creatures made of stone, clay and metal, but he had never met face to face. Shadi stood a little further away and continued, mocking, bursting into malicious laughter. But if it was clearly not real, the giant gave the unmistakable impression of a very near and tangible danger. All this time, she (in fact, the Empress!) only distracted him, hiding the real threat. To slay him when he is least ready.

–Kill him! Shadi said to the giant, and turning around, she walked away, vanishing into thin air. The latter, without answering, strolled heavily towards the Prince. His gait and guttural growl resembled a beast rather than a man or creature like him. The Empress had summoned him to life, endowing his mind with nothing more than the ability to obey commands and make the most of his power.

The prince ran back to the place where he had dealt with the sand soldiers and grabbed one of the swords, which seemed to him more convenient than the one he already had. At the same time, the Prince had a few seconds to assess the situation. He understood that attacking such an opponent head-on was not just pointless. This is certain death - he can destroy it with one blow. But his strength was also his weakness - his powerful body made the giant clumsy and slow. The prince decided to take advantage of this and pretended to attack him from the front, but at the last moment he ducked, dodging the monster's huge fist, and dived under it, finding himself behind the enemy. It was also encased in armor - several massive plates fastened with leather straps. They bore the same symbol as the flags hung all over the Island.

The prince stabbed the monster several times, but they didn't seem to hurt or hurt him at all. At some point, enraged by the Prince's actions, it let out a menacing roar and, despite its clumsiness and slowness, jumped sharply on the spot, turning in the air. The prince did not expect such agility from him, and almost fell under his giant foot that it would have crushed him in an instant, having managed to jump to the side in time. And then, suddenly, the Prince had an idea - he found himself next to a stream of water pouring from the wall and running down the drain to the cliff. He put his sword under him and again, by cunning and deception, found himself behind the giant's back. The prince struck him on the leg and he howled, crouching on one knee, which allowed him to climb onto the

monster's back and inflict another wound in the torso. The second blow was just as painful for him, but it had a different effect and made him stand up abruptly and try to throw the Prince off his back, grabbing him with a giant hand or simply shaking him off. He was forced to dodge in every possible way, while holding on as tightly as possible to anything - belts, metal plates or a riveted gorget that protected his neck. In addition, he was worried that he might accidentally lose the locket. If the Prince suddenly loses it, then the outcome of the battle with the monster can be very unpredictable. He had been just hanging around his neck until now, unable to do him any serious harm, only pulling him aside and leading him by the nose from time to time, deceiving and cunning. Well, the wound in the leg should have prevented him from moving normally. Unless he understands his whole plan and throws him off.

Such an uncomfortable state of affairs did not stop the Prince. He was ready to fight even with a giant animate stone block. The prince had time to examine the metal gorget - it could not be broken with a sword. You will need more powerful weapons, such as a hammer or axe, to reach the vulnerable part of the monster's body. So he struck the torso once more, not as deep as the first time, but still painful for the giant. After that, the Prince, jumping, grabbed the gorget and pulled it with all his might, forcing the monster to back away in the direction of the pouring water.

The prince felt the monster's huge fist close around his body - he was in the reach zone. And at the same time, with the same hand, the giant touched the water and roared in pain - the water literally devoured it and it disappeared before our eyes. With a last desperate movement, the giant threw the Prince aside, unable to do him any other harm.

The fall battered the Prince, but he was in much better shape than his enemy - he lost one arm, and his gait became uncertain and even slower. But despite this, the enemy was still heading towards the Prince, ready to continue the fight until only one of them was left alive. The prince looked around and grabbed a weighty axe lying on the ground, which had been held by one of the guards before. After that, he rushed to meet the monster. A few steps before him, the Prince turned sharply to the side, dodging another blow from his remaining hand, and, jumping sharply from the wall, jumped on this arm, ran along the shoulder and jumped. Falling down, he struck a powerful blow with his axe on the gorget and it partially gave way - several rivets that held it together flew out, and it no longer seemed so strong. The prince continued to hit him with all his might, knocking out rivet after rivet. Now it was easier to dodge the giant arm - the Prince climbed to the rest of his right shoulder in time, and no matter how hard the monster tried, it could not grab the Prince

and throw him off his back. However, his active waving of his remaining arm helped the Prince a lot - the gorget was becoming unusable faster and faster.

And then, after another blow, it flew off the monster's neck and the Prince instantly took the chance and plunged the sword, which still had a few drops of water on it, into the monster's head, passing through its neck. The latter's movements almost instantly lost all meaning, and it no longer tried to throw off the Prince. In desperation, it only staggered towards the Tower. The prince repeated the blow and pressed on the giant's head so that he was pulled forward. This coincided with the fact that in the last moment of his agony, he began to run and flew with all his might into the closed door blocking the entrance to the Tower. And almost instantly, his body turned into a huge cloud of Sand Dust. The prince jumped to the ground a second before the collision.

The debris of the gate crushed several of the guards behind it, and the Prince found himself alone in the courtyard of the Mecha Tower. Now he had to find a way up, but another closed door blocked him... There was something familiar about it, but he couldn't remember exactly what it was. Like a forgotten dream in which he could not go through a closed door, and then could not get back. But the sensation itself was elusively subtle and weightless. Only fragments and fragments still lingered in the Prince's mind, suggesting that the Empress was once again trying to cloud his mind and erase the memory of the past. Oh, how convenient it is – each time he will remember only a short fragment from his life, and follow illusory, invented goals, trying to understand again where he is and who he is in general.

The prince no longer wished the Empress anything but death - it did not matter to him how many more heads he had to cut off. He was willing to bathe in the blood of his enemies, destroying anyone who stood in his way. Because this was the only way he could escape from Dahaki - escape sooner or later would not be the most effective method.

Relative silence reigned around him - except for the slightly muffled hum of the streams of water somewhere behind him and the still beating heart, the Prince heard nothing. It was disturbed only by the creaking of a water wheel nearby. It was located on the side wall of one of the Tower's annexes. As the Prince approached it, he heard the hammers strike on the anvil and realized that there was a forge inside, and the wheel must be driving huge bellows, fanning the heat in the furnaces. Black smoke poured out of the chimney at the far end of the building - the work was in full swing.

The prince walked over to the massive waterwheel and, taking water in his hands, washed his face several times, getting rid of dirt

and sweat, and then drank with pleasure. Indeed, water is the source of all life. Life-giving moisture saves people and animals from death in the desert, when there is only sand around. But it turned out that she was capable of more. The prince could not help but note her strength in the fight against sand monsters - for them she was fatal. I wonder if it works in the same way as a dagger or if it's just a temporary effect? But perhaps the dagger was more reliable - once the Prince got it, he would always stay with him. And there might not be any water nearby.

Of all the relics, the Prince had only a medallion now, but it had managed to surprise him. In addition to the fact that he has a huge power that he cannot yet control and is even afraid of, how does he know what the medallion is truly capable of? The prince discovered another of his interesting abilities: to foresee the future a few seconds in advance. In a sense, it was similar to a dagger, but it made it possible not to correct a mistake that had already been made, but to prevent it. But does he really see the future? What if it only changes consciousness, making it more receptive? What if time is always a few seconds ahead, but we become aware of it a little more slowly, with a slight delay? Does the medallion simply allow you to eliminate this imperfection?

The prince grabbed one of the spokes of the waterwheel and climbed up, jumping down onto the ledge. As he walked through it, he stole a glance through one of the windows of the smithy, where work was indeed in full swing. The prince again noticed ordinary people, like the ones he had met in the Garden, but still so weak-willed and indifferent to everything. Most likely, they got the hardest part of the work.

Despite the rage that still burned within him, the Prince decided not to attract too much attention - the Empress must have prepared many more tests for him - and, balancing on a narrow ledge, moved on. Soon he reached a place from which he could jump down to one of the passages that connected the forge to the Tower.

The bridge rested on a rock, rounding which, the Prince could get into the Tower - this door was open. But he noticed a guard at the entrance and decided to act differently - not to waste time in fighting, but, rounding the rock on the other side, grabbed one of the large chains that stretched to the middle of the tower. At this point, another wheel protruded from the wall, motionless. Obviously, it set these chains in motion, being part of some larger mechanism. But this did not bother the Prince too much now, for he hurried up the chain as quickly as possible and infiltrated the Tower. When he reached the wooden wheel, the Prince climbed onto it and found himself in a narrow passage not intended for humans. He had to crouch down to squeeze his way to the chute, through which a

stream of water poured, diverted to the side - most likely, it was somehow controlled, allowing the wheel to move. Until that happened, and the current was weak enough, the Prince climbed into it and, knee-deep in water, proceeded up, just in case, holding on to the ledges on the wall.

He was lucky - the passage led into the Tower, but it was located in such a way that it still allowed him to remain unnoticed. And he himself would not have been able to choose when to reveal himself - to remain in the shadows for a long time anyway: he saw how the guards walked everywhere, looking around and waiting for his appearance. It was impossible to pass by them all. But at least the Prince had the opportunity to look around and plan everything.

The turret was hollow from the inside, practically without ceilings and partitions. The basis of all internal structures was made up of suspended wooden platforms, stairs and bridges arranged in many tiers. All of them looked as if they were regularly rebuilt to meet current needs. A few stone structures served as a support for larger mechanisms, among which, in addition to water wheels, there were systems of gears, channels for water, which rushed up the gutters thanks to a screw shaft driven by another stream. Not far from where the Prince was, there was one horizontal water wheel - it turned a massive vertical shaft that went into one of the walls of the Tower. The prince remembered the water curtain behind which the time portals were hidden each time and decided that the water in them must be pumped thanks to one of these mechanisms. And in the same way she goes into the fountains that beat in the Garden.

Garden! The Prince's eyes widened in surprise and he turned his head, looking around, not fully understanding where he was. His breathing became ragged and heavy. He remembered! Not long ago, he had been in a completely different part of the fortress, and although it all seemed to him a dream, the vision was most likely true. The one that the Empress made him forget! She wanted to force him to run back and forth forever, forgetting what had happened an hour ago and wearing him down with battles. And that made the Prince even more surprised how lucky he was to snatch this accidental memory from the pool of memory, to see it in the thick fog of his own thoughts. The Empress was definitely doing this deliberately, she had something to hide, her goal was to prevent the Prince from discovering or achieving anything. But what? Maybe she was afraid not of him, but of her, of her daughter, that she dared to go against her will? Asking himself these questions, the Prince felt a new rush of memories - he had thought about them before and came to the same conclusion - he needed to try to save the stranger and ask her everything. Now that her life depended only on him, she

would surely help him more willingly. After all, all her own plans failed.

It was to the Prince's advantage that the Tower was poorly lit from the inside, and water was roaring everywhere – if (or rather, when) it was noticed, it would not be all at once. He will be able to get rid of enemies on his way in small groups. And, spurred on by the flood of memories, the Prince leaped out of the shadows and rushed to the top of the Tower, throwing enemies to the sides and even cutting off the ropes in entire sections, causing them to fall down. Until the same thing was done by a Being who suddenly appeared in front of him. Surprise crossed his face, but only for a moment. The prince remembered how it had imprisoned him behind a massive door, and angrily shouted to him:

"What do you want from me?"

But there was already an insurmountable gap between them - an entire span of suspension bridge collapsed down, and the Prince had to find a new way. The creature again hurried to hide, without entering into a direct confrontation. The prince only had time to notice a meaningful expression in his gaze - it did not look like that of an ordinary sand monster. Maybe he has a special position, like Shadi? Or is he an illusion altogether, as she is now? But can an illusion bring down a bridge?

The prince turned and pounced on the three guards who had arrived in time. Inside the Tower, they were dressed differently: their faces were wrapped in a red cloth that left only their eyes (still orange) and covered their shoulders and chest. It was also wrapped around the bracers and belt of soldiers, over dark shirts and pants. Instead of axes and crude swords, each of them held skillful sabers with wide blades. Apparently, the guards of the fortress were divided into some groups or clans, differing in clothing and weapons.

One of them was rudely pushed by the Prince under the stream of water that poured nearby. Grabbing his weapon, the Prince threw another sword towards the second soldier who was a little further away. The hit did not finish him off, but it completely disoriented him. Meanwhile, the Prince repelled the attack of the third enemy - he turned out to be more successful, and the Prince had to face him in a direct confrontation. As it turned out, these soldiers were much better at wielding a sword and it was no longer so easy to deal with them. The Empress clearly learned from her mistakes.

When the Prince's sword pierced the body of the enemy, he managed to wheeze:

"I have fallen, but others will take my place!"

This phrase raised new questions in the Prince's mind. Could it be that his guesses were correct? He hoped that this was just a coincidence, disorder and thoughtlessness in the actions of the

Empress. But it seemed that she was still about to show her full strength, if the Prince was nimble and lucky enough not to die almost immediately. Her traps will be more and more insidious – she is already forcing him to create problems for himself, without her participation.

But what kind of Being is it? And why did the medallion continue to help the Prince, showing the future in battle with enemies, but was blind before his appearance?

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The tower turned out to be built somewhat differently than the Prince thought. When he reached the top, he found a passage to another part of it, much larger. The one inside was more complex than the first: the mechanisms were located more densely, incomprehensibly connected to each other. Their diversity was also striking. For example, the Tower had many devices for regulating the strength of water flows: with the help of dividers - special longitudinal partitions that divided the force of the canal into several parts, which were then diverted in different directions; retarders - transverse blades with adjustable reach, located in a zigzag pattern along the edges of the channels that prevented the water from accelerating. But if individually each of them seemed relatively simple and understandable, then it was simply impossible to disassemble all the intricacies and connections that formed this single complex mechanism. Moreover, obviously, the first part of the Tower was also a part of it, which performed, rather, service functions.

The Prince did not have time to pay enough attention to all this, but even he noticed a huge mechanism that, thanks to a pendulum and a system of gears with counterweights, made movements at regular intervals. There was no denying the genius of whoever invented this device, whatever it was used for. With its help, it was possible to supply water through the channels in portions, adjust the work of mechanisms to each other and simply measure the time. And probably something else, but the Prince couldn't even imagine what it was. He only saw in them an excellent illustration of the principle "every action has consequences" and understood that everything has its causes, the very first impulse that sets in motion, like a mechanism, a complex chain of events. His constant flight from Dahaki was just one of these consequences, which was, moreover, useless to fight. The prince couldn't stop the raging flow of water by simply blocking his path. But he could control the flow, directing it in the right direction at will, if only he got to the source. And such a

source in his fate was the creation of the Sands of Time. The only root cause of all his suffering and deprivation.

Inside the second part of the Tower, there was not much open space, it was divided into separate halls and passages by stone walls, columns and massive ceilings. After overcoming several tiers, the Prince suddenly collided with another giant, like the one he had defeated just recently. But he was lucky - he did not notice him. And there was no Shadi nearby, or rather her illusion. Most likely, the Empress uses these golems for the hardest work, where neither an obedient slave nor a sand soldier can cope. This particular giant, as the Prince thought, controls the work of the weights of the clock mechanism, moving them to the desired position in time.

The prince crept past the giant unnoticed, trying not to approach him, and began to climb up. He blocked the Prince's way to the next hall, and he was going to deal with him, but this time without risking his life. At some point, the giant did notice the Prince, but he was no longer reachable and relatively safe, so the giant began to just watch him. The prince, making his way between the giant gears, climbed the adjacent wall and began to move towards the stone counterweights. Catching up with one of them, the Prince, taking advantage of the fact that he was a little higher, jumped off the wall and found himself on top of it. Holding on to the cable, he began to swing the counterweight from side to side. At one of the extreme points, the Prince struck the cable with his sword and the load flew down. A few seconds later, it slammed into the floor and split into several pieces. But the giant remained unharmed, and although his face did not express any emotion, it seemed that he raised his gaze, filled with a grin and a silent question: "Is that all?"

But the Prince's plan was somewhat different from the very beginning. He had already studied his enemy and knew that he was not very smart. It was enough to distract his attention with such a simple trick, lowering his vigilance. In the meantime, the second counterweight, which was now unrestrained, rushed, with a slight delay, to the point where the giant stood. And with one massive blow, the cargo literally destroyed him, scattering the remnants of his armor and clouds of sand dust around. The prince held on to the cable all this time, and when it reached the top point, he grabbed the crossbar and hurried to make his way back.

At the noise, the guards came running, but the Prince dealt with them in the blink of an eye. Blow after blow, death after death (though they were long dead anyway), and the guards fell, turning into handfuls of sand dust. With someone, the Prince was even less ceremonious, simply pushing under the pouring water. All his actions were decisive and cruel - he did not want to think, did not try to surprise the enemy or give importance to the battle. It was more like

clearing a path from thickets in the impenetrable jungle. The prince literally destroyed his enemies, hating them and fearing that they might come back to life. And so he made his way up, tier by tier, to where he was sure the stranger was imprisoned.

He wanted to help her if the opportunity presented itself. But, first of all, he wanted to learn something from her that would help him in the battle with the Empress - it seemed to him inevitable and the only possible way out. Or something that will help this fight happen at all. For example, he was going to ask her about the dagger and how to get it. It would be useful to him in battle, because the Prince was still not sure that the deaths of his enemies were real. But a dagger would definitely put an end to this issue. Besides, it is probably the only weapon capable of killing the Empress - it is unlikely that she is vulnerable to an ordinary sword.

A long staircase led to the very top of the Tower, which encircled it several times. The flights of stairs were connected by narrow open balconies. Stepping out onto one of them, the Prince looked at the view - the entire outer island was in full view (so high was the Tower). In a strange incomprehensible way, the shape of this double island resembled the image on a medallion! The same crescent shape, and the fortress is a thick dot in the center. Why, then, did the outer island fall into absolute desolation during the Prince's time? Because of visiting the Maharaja Island? Apparently, he visited the past when Sand was created and was able to defeat the Empress despite this. How powerful his army was! But having defeated one evil, he gave birth to another, bringing the Sands of Time to the mainland. And, by chance, it turned out that his own fate is now closely intertwined with these events. Perhaps he should try to influence them first?

Then the Prince looked down - the damage to the clock mechanism had damaged the forge, flooding it. Shouts could be heard from below, soldiers were running around - this gave him a little respite and respite - all the enemy forces were now concentrated there.

The upper tier looked half-empty - there were no mechanisms here, and the noise of the water was noticeably quieter. The silence was broken only by the roar of the wind, breaking through the windows and roof from one side to the other. In the center of the hall stood a stone pedestal, to which a single bridge led, and on which a cage was installed. A prisoner languished in it, sitting on the ground from helplessness, her back resting on the bars. The cage itself seemed familiar to the Prince, but not because he had seen it in the Garden. She did look very much like her, but the Prince felt that it was something else.

Hearing footsteps, the stranger turned around and, seeing the Prince, stood up and spoke first:

"You shouldn't have returned. These places are very dangerous! she said.

"So that's how you meet the one who came to save you?" The Prince asked in bewilderment. The stranger's words really hurt him a little.

"That's not what you came here for. I know that you are only interested in your own salvation and want to get to the Empress through me. Please, at least don't pretend that I'm important to you in any other way," she replied.

"Maybe you're right about something. But does a deed cease to be good if it is done not of one's own free will, but out of necessity? The Prince objected to her.

"That's not the point, Prince. I am grateful to you for saving my life. But I don't know if it would be a good deed to help you in return," the stranger explained.

–What do you mean? All I'm asking for is a little information! The Prince asked again uncomprehendingly. And without waiting for an answer, he added: "I can free you, if you wish, right now, instead of torturing you with questions. Maybe this will convince you?

"I'm not bargaining with you, understand. When I started my own business, I did not count on anyone's help. I knew what I was getting into, aware of all the possible consequences. But I also knew what I wanted to achieve from the Empress. Do you know what you want from her? The stranger tried to explain.

The prince seemed to be beginning to understand what she was getting at, but decided that there was no point in lying and dodging. His intentions were literally seen through, and any careless word would have betrayed him. He sighed and told the stranger:

"At first, I just wanted to meet and talk to her. But now I'm hungry for a fight, after all she's done to me... and with you!

"What were you going to talk to her about?" She's busy creating the Sands of Time! The stranger objected.

–I know. I know a lot. And it is about the creation of the Sands that our conversation would be," the Prince replied. "I'd like to convince her not to create them.

–A what? Are you serious? Even if you do find a way to fight her and defeat her, there is no way you can stop the creation of the Sands of Time! Their appearance is prescribed in the timeline. It is impossible to change your fate! The stranger answered, grinning.

The prince hesitated. She repeated Zoroaster's words, exactly. Two completely different and unrelated people. And more recently, Shadi said the same thing. This had a force over him and gave rise to new doubts in his mind. Meanwhile, the stranger continued:

"You say that you care not only about your own fate, and that you want to take revenge on the Empress for me as well. But you don't even know my name! The stranger reproached the Prince.

"Without flinching, she condemned her own daughter to death!" The Prince suddenly exclaimed. Part of his doubts was about whether he really wanted to help the stranger, or whether he was incapable of thinking of anyone but himself. He left his father, left Babylon, and... The prince could feel the feeling of guilt pulling him down into the dark depths, to the very bottom, where in the haze of gloomy thoughts there was not a single glimmer of hope.

"So you know that too?" The stranger interrupted his thoughts. – Yes, that's true. But I still don't know if I'm ready to go against her.

The prince was silent, not fully collecting his thoughts. The stranger looked at him questioningly, raising her right eyebrow. At some point, when the silence had already become awkward, the Prince suddenly came to his senses and found nothing better than to say:

"Oh, I'm sorry!" I was so... What's your name?

"Kaileena," the girl said.

This name... it seemed familiar to him. As if he had known him all along, from the beginning, as if someone had told him beforehand. But how is this possible? It seems that there were only two options - either he is really divided in two, like Kaileena, and can at least superficially feel his other half, even if it is like an elusive dream; Or the normal course of time did not disappear anywhere, but it only seemed to him that time froze. And, therefore, there is a "before" and "after". Unless it's all a vision, a dream he has while he sleeps in confinement. How he wished that all this had not been a vision!

"And what is the name of the Empress?" The Prince asked suddenly, wanting to dispel his hazy thoughts and learn something useful.

"Not even I know her name. From a very early age, I called her Empress, bowing my head obediently. Sometimes I've been allowed to call her mother, but that's all," Caileena replied with sadness in her voice, adding after a moment, "I may not know her name until moments before she dies. And only if I find myself nearby.

"So the Empress is mortal?" The Prince asked, snatching out of all the words of his interlocutor only what really interested him.

Kaileena sighed heavily and answered.

– Yes, it is. But it's hard for me to talk about it. I... She is...

The girl stopped in mid-sentence, not finding the right one. She looked away and stepped back a couple of steps. The prince felt that he was rushing things and tried to calm her down.

"You know, I'm immensely grateful to you, too. That locket you gave me was invaluable," he muttered.

"Is he still with you?" Kaileena asked, not turning to the Prince.

"Yes," he answered.

"Okay, keep him." It is very valuable and will help you survive as long as possible. I know the Empress's temper - she won't stop until she destroys you," Caileena explained. "At least until she comes to her senses.

"Oh, believe me, I've experienced it to the fullest!" I'm still not even sure that all this is not an illusion," the Prince replied.

"What if all this really turned out to be a deception, a vision?" The girl asked.

"I'm afraid it would hit me very hard. It is hard to feel lost not only in time, but also in space. As if suspended in emptiness, without support or guidance," the Prince told her of his fears.

"Sounds bleak," Kaileena concluded.

"And after all, you're the only person I can talk to in this place," the Prince added. This time he spoke sincerely.

"Did you come alone?" The girl asked, as if ignoring the Prince's attempts to win her favor.

"A crew of thirteen people sailed with me on the ship. Some died at sea, in a shipwreck, and some died on the way to the fortress, in the jungle on the outer island. But we split up at the very entrance to the fortress. They did not want to go any further with me. Of course, I deceived them! The Prince said regretfully.

"I feel sorry for you, but no one on your team is alive," Kaileena said coldly.

The prince wanted to answer something, but he could not find the strength to lie to himself. Somewhere, deep down, he agreed with her and knew the truth. And this latent feeling of guilt had long weighed on him. None of them would have survived in this place, at least not without someone's help.

"I'm sorry, I see it's depressing you." But the Empress is merciless, and her soldiers are ruthless assassins, executors of her will," Caileena said with sympathy in her voice.

"No, you're right," the Prince replied bitterly. "It's a miracle that I'm still alive myself.

"Why don't you leave this place?" The interlocutor asked. "Understand, I want, without any hesitation, to help you survive. But...

"I can't afford that luxury. Thank you for the advice, but freedom is not something I own. Freedom for me is a prison, because as soon as I stop, a beast named Dahaka will overtake me and kill me," the Prince finally explained.

"So I was right?" Kaileena asked.

"Is it a guess that I want to change my fate?" The Prince replied with a counter question. Although, from her tone, it seemed that she did not expect any answer, but only expressed her thought aloud.

–No. That I doubted whether to help you. I am not talking about saving a life, but about your real goal – the death of the Empress. I see that you will stop at nothing - you simply have no choice. At any rate, you think you don't have one. But I definitely have it and I'm not ready to go against her. My whole story in general, in a way, is an accident. I didn't want to cause her any problems. I wanted to get rid of them," Kailina said.

"I don't quite understand you. You speak in riddles," the Prince replied dryly.

"In general, it doesn't matter. The real meaning is that if I help you, I will go against myself," the interlocutor explained.

"Does that mean you're ready to go against me, to stand in my way?" The Prince asked, a little frightened. He was afraid of losing such a valuable ally, but, in principle, he was ready for anything.

–No. I don't want that either," Kaileena replied.

"Of course, I saved your life and I'm ready to do it again!" The Prince quipped.

"Don't...," the prisoner began.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I am too accustomed to the precariousness of my position that I sometimes forget myself. The sands took away my confidence in anything at all," the Prince apologized and asked, "But I really don't understand what you want then. What are you going to do?

"I want to help you, but only halfway," Kaileena said.

–Why? Or rather, how does it feel to help halfway? The Prince asked, embarrassed.

"No, I meant that my desire to help is only half strong," the prisoner explained, and after a short pause, she continued: "You remind me of the Empress. She, like you, knows her fate - she read it in the timeline. And just like you, she wants to overcome it, instead of accepting it. The closer the time of her death approaches, the more clearly she sees it and the greater her pain. She drives the Empress mad, forcing her to commit madness and indulge in false hope! And that's why she would never give up on creating the Sands of Time! With their help, she is going to change her fate.

"I think I understand. Do you think that I can go mad too? The Prince asked, pondering what Kaileena had said.

– I'm afraid so. Some say that knowledge is power. But I believe that excessive knowledge, such as how and when you will die, is poison! That's why I stole the Ring from her - with its help she reads the timeline and knows her fate in advance," Kaileena continued to explain. "I hoped it would ease her pain and cool her mind. But it

seems to be too late. And you seem to be walking the same road – everything looks exactly like that. And besides, you are another stranger. Do you know how many people like you came here? And how much more will come, following their greedy insane goals? The Empress has shown me many times the future, foggy and distant, but there was always a madman in it, even more terrible than she is now. So why don't you suddenly turn out to be one?

"What do you personally believe in?" The Prince asked evasively.

"All my life I believed that fate could not be changed. However, something in me wants you to succeed. But not by her methods! And that's why I vacillate between wanting and not wanting to help you. It's like I'm somewhere in between," Kaileena drawled thoughtfully. "And that's why I gave you this locket—it wouldn't have happened if I had been against you.

"It's a good thing she doesn't know I have him!" But so I have to promise you not to kill her? The Prince asked, confused. And then, already decisively, he added: "But I can't do otherwise – she forces me!

"There is no need to make a promise that you will most likely not be able to keep," the prisoner replied.

"But what am I to do then?" You pose an unsolvable problem to me! The Prince said a little angrily. "I'll have to leave you and find a way to cheat on fate myself."

– I have already said – I knew what I was getting into. I am ready for my fate, I am almost reconciled to it. This ring... his knowledge poisons me too," Kaileena said distantly.

"You talk as if you don't want to be saved at all!" The Prince became even angrier.

"My thoughts are entangled in cobwebs, and my mind is torn in half!" Do you know how much effort it costs me to talk? If you still want to help me, then save my mind, help my consciousness to regain its wholeness. Then I'll be able to think more clearly, and we'll once again discuss a possible solution to your problem," Caileena replied sternly, reasoning with the Prince.

He stopped and squeezed out after a few seconds:

"She said something about the Garden in which your other half will be imprisoned.

Each of his own words seemed incredibly familiar to the Prince, as if he knew them in advance, but he could not change anything. He could only treat them differently, as if he saw and heard himself from the outside, from afar. Only in these strange, subtle and weightless doubts did he feel (but not realize!) what was really happening. It even seemed to him that he was dead and simply, over and over again, watching the events of his life, each time getting used to the role, but unable to turn off the beaten path. But these sensations

were even lighter than an elusive dream that was about to be forgotten. And Kaileena was also part of this dream - he heard all her words a second before they left her lips.

"I can barely feel it. With every minute I get weaker and weaker. I'm not sure if my salvation is even possible, that's why I behave this way," the prisoner explained.

"A man who is facing death does not care that his goal is impossible. I see in all this only an obstacle, and not the biggest one," the Prince replied to her.

"You're only brave because you haven't experienced all of its power," Kaileena said sadly. "Soon she will turn her gaze back on you and act for sure. But, as I said, something in me wants you to succeed. I just see it differently. You must become... an example for her! In this, I see the solution to the problem. Perhaps this will give her reasons to live, and not exist as she does now. In constant fear, under the oppression of his own dark thoughts. The fact is that the timeline tells us everything that will happen. But he does not say how. It does not determine how we feel about it. This may be the key to the puzzle. After all, if our thoughts determine the shape of things, then maybe it is possible to create Sands in some other way?

Kaileena's words had an effect on the Prince and plunged him into thought. The prisoner watched him, but did not interfere with his thoughts. His distant gaze seemed to say, "I need time to realize what you said."

After a minute or two the Prince answered her:

"I agree.

He didn't give any explanation of his decision, but he could tell from Kaileena's look that she wasn't asking for them. An attempt is all he is capable of in such a position. So he decided to get down to business and continued with the words:

"It turns out that in the end, we still need to get into the throne room. But how to do it?

"Find my other half in the Garden and...," Kaileena said, stretching out her hand, palm down, "give me the locket."

The prince took it from her neck and put it in her hand. Kaileena took the locket, immediately pressing the Prince's hand on top and whispering:

"Don't let him go.

Kaileen closed her eyes and continued to press the locket to her hand and the Prince's. At that moment, she was muttering something unintelligible, the locket glowing, and part of this glow seemed to flow into her hand. Or vice versa, it flowed from it - it was difficult to make out, because some vague images began to flash in the Prince's mind, he heard voices. But everything, suddenly, ended, as abruptly as it began.

– ... and give the locket to her," Kailina finished her sentence. "Part of my memory is now sealed in it, the only way to make my mind one again. As if on a bridge, it will move from one point to another. And then the body.

At that moment, the Prince felt as if he could no longer feel her hand, and his hand went through her, just like it did with the dagger.

"But how can I get into the Garden?" I don't even remember how I ended up here, but at the very beginning of my journey here, I saw an opening sealed by the Sands behind me, which, if I returned to it, would not allow me to go any further," the Prince doubted.

"Only someone who knows how to wait can pass through the seal," Kaileena replied.

The prince looked at her inquiringly and uncomprehendingly. The prisoner hastened to add:

– Many people give up trying, resting on something, and look for another way. They are in too much of a hurry, ready to face what lies ahead. They are angry and curse. But you just need to know how to wait. After all, have you already noticed that time flows here in a special way, differently, not in the way you are used to? And it's not just about the Empress. These seals were invented many years before her to stop the hottest heads. Lay down your arms and wait obediently - only then will you be able to pass.

"But I can't wait!" The Prince exclaimed.

"I'm sorry, but there's no other way," the captive said. "Perhaps the medallion will help you pass these few hours - it can change the perception of time. It will flow in its usual measured course, but it will seem to go faster if your mind penetrates deeply enough into its mysteries.

The prince turned away and thoughtfully stepped aside, looking at the patch of sky that could be seen in one of the windows. A minute later he turned to the prisoner and asked:

"You said I hadn't experienced her full power yet. What awaits me? What should I be prepared for?

"It's hard to say for sure, but she will try to convince you of something. Maybe it will be like an inner voice. Her words will be sweet, but deceitful," Cailin began the story.

"I know perfectly well what I want, she can't convince me with her fairy tales!" The Prince interrupted her.

"Or maybe you won't hear any voice." But if you feel a strong pressure, your will will be under constant pressure, and you will lose your self-control. It will be difficult to understand whether you are doing something at her request or whether you wanted it yourself. It will penetrate into your consciousness, it will know your every thought. Oh, you have chosen a very powerful enemy and you don't even know anything about him! The prisoner hastened to upset him.

"First the seals, then this... I'm afraid I won't be able to make it," said the Prince.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" What drives you? Kaileena asked. "You still haven't really explained why you want to stop her from creating the Sands of Time?" How does it relate to you?

"In my time, I found them in the treasury of the enemy, the Indian Maharajah. There was also a dagger. Both were stolen from this island, I don't know how. And I, with the help of a dagger, let the Sands out...," the Prince said.

"And that's why Dahaka is chasing you?" I should have guessed right away," Kailina interrupted Prince.

"What do you know about it?" The Prince asked animatedly.

"Enough to say you're doomed. To be honest, I'm surprised you've made it this far. Dahaka tracks down most of his victims almost instantly, tearing them out of the timeline and bringing them the fate that is prepared for them," Kaileena replied disappointingly.

"And I didn't go this far to fall," the Prince replied dryly. "Better help me and tell me how I can resist your mistress?"

"Don't you see?" I'm already helping you! Kaileena replied with a note of resentment in her voice.

"Well, you're right. But, believe me, it's hard for me too. To live when such a threat constantly hangs over me. I live in constant fear, I have to run away and hide all the time. It is as if I am losing myself, part by part, it is more and more difficult for me to think about others, and not only about myself. I can be discourteous and ungrateful, that's true. But I will still have time to apologize to those whom I undeservedly offended," the Prince explained.

Kaileena stared at him, from judgmental to sympathetic.

"Remember that when it penetrates into your consciousness, it cannot be omnipotent. It mixes with yours through the Sands and is also vulnerable, in part. Firstly, this manifests itself in the fact that she will not be able to lie to you in everything - you can definitely consider small inaccuracies and flaws in her words. She will not be able to hide the whole truth from you - you will see it in some small details, insignificant details, you just have to look closely. And, of course, she will convince you of the unattainability of your goal, any of them," the prisoner explained.

"I know that," the Prince replied to her. "She is not the first to use the power of the Sands against me for persuasion. I know how to counter it.

"You can, however, use this as an opportunity to get to know her better." This can be called a kind of dialogue. Yes, a very strange conversation, but still a conversation. And perhaps you will be able to look into her mind! Kaileena finished her story, but seeing the question in the Prince's eyes, she added: "Or she will see something

in you that will help her change her mind. The promise you made to me, I'm talking about it. Try to find the strength to restrain him!

"I'll try," the Prince replied dryly. Despite the promise he made, he strongly doubted that he was able to feel sympathy for his enemy. Although he had to admit any possibility - it seemed that nothing would really surprise him.

"Then go!" You're safe as long as you're in my time, Dahaka won't look for you here," Kaileena concluded.

"I know, because the Sands have not yet been created!" The Prince said and hurried away.

When he descended, he realized that he had not even thanked the prisoner for all the help, but he decided not to return. His own excuse suited him well now: he would have plenty of time to do so later.

And she helped him in many ways, explaining what motivates the Empress, how she thinks and acts. She also wants to change her fate! But his and her success in this endeavor were on the opposite sides of the moment of the creation of the Sands of Time. Their interests coincide, but the ways to achieve the goal itself were decidedly contradictory. The sands were a stumbling block, a kind of apple of discord and left no chance for a peaceful solution to the problem. The conflict was simply inevitable.

Kaileena told the Prince about the locket and the Ring, and also gave him an interesting idea: meeting Dahaka at this time, the Prince's past, would be a sign that the Sands had been created and that he was doomed. But until he meets him, hope is still alive for the Prince.

But he was tormented by the thought that he would have to wait before the seal was opened. Wasting time when every second is already precious! No, this will not happen! The Empress only wants him to follow a long and deceptively safe path, and she can continue to do her business without hindrance.

"There's always another way!" The Prince stammered, passing by the portal hall located in the passage between the two parts of the Tower. He had noticed it on the way to the top, but felt that there was no need to use it. It would be rather madness. And now the idea seemed justified to the Prince. Dahaka would surely hunt him down again, but the Prince was determined to run away from him again by reaching the portal in the Garden, whether it was the first or the second. The Empress will be blind and will not see the Prince, will not be able to read his thoughts and cloud his mind. And, most importantly, he will not advance for a second in the creation of the Sands of Time. Without hesitation, the Prince went back to the present. He deliberately took a risk that he had recently considered unjustified. But he did not know a better way.

Time had changed the Tower a lot: part of the wall and the roof had crumbled, making the way down to the exit of their Tower a significant problem even for the Prince. Most of the wooden catwalks rotted away, and they collapsed or hung, supported by only one or two cables. The prince moved slowly, climbing from ledge to ledge, occasionally using the miraculously preserved stone passages. He climbed down the cables, carefully stepped over the log supports sticking out from somewhere and simply jumped down when the height allowed.

The prince hoped that Dahaka would not come for him as long as possible. But each time he found it faster and faster. And then the Prince felt cold again and heard the heavy footsteps of the beast. It was as if his icy breath filled the entire hall in an instant. The monster jumped down from somewhere above, and the Prince's mind immediately felt some strange fatigue and hopelessness again. He began to think that he would never get out of the Tower and Dahaka would grab him in a moment. Although he was sure that from the top he saw how over time one of the front doors flew off its hinges and fell next to it, freeing the exit. This helped the Prince, because he would not have been able to get out using the chain again - the beast would have caught him halfway down.

Gathering his will into a fist, the Prince grabbed the rope hanging nearby and ran at a run, using the concavity of the walls of the Tower, using the force that pulled him away from the rope. Once on the other side, he hurried to hide in a narrow opening with a ladder leading down and, jumping over the gaps, rushed along it. The staircase had been badly damaged by time, and the Prince had to jump from boulder to boulder frequently. But the way down, as before, was not blocked by anything. Behind the wall, he heard the dull roar of an enraged beast. He knew where the Prince was and slammed against the wall, trying to break through it, while continuing to move down, chasing his victim. The only thing the Prince was afraid of was that Dahaka would cut off his path. And he probably would have done so, if the Prince had not noticed how on the second tier the staircase diverged in two different directions. He chose a direction at random and in a few seconds he ran unhindered through the gate of the Tower, and then through the hole in the door, which he made with the help of a giant summoned by Shadi. Now all that remained was to get to the Central Hall, get to its opposite side and run to the portal in the Garden. He would have nowhere to hide there, all the space around him would be open, so the Prince saved his strength.

But he had been there before!

The Prince had a renewed epiphany, perhaps because the Empress's spell was rapidly fading in the present. And since going to

the Garden was a kind of future for him, then he had gone to the Clockwork Tower to the Garden! And now he's here for the second time! That was why he felt familiar and familiar with each of the words he and Kaileena had spoken. And the name itself was already familiar to him not by chance! But, on his first attempt, he acted differently and fell for the Empress's trick - he forgot everything, including the conversation with the prisoner. And he came to his senses only when he found himself in the Garden, remembering absolutely nothing of what had happened. Now he found a new thread, despite the intrigues of the Empress and the stubbornness of fate, which diligently led him along the same path. And now it was clear why, when he came to the Tower for the second time, he had almost forgotten the journey through the Garden and his captivity - all this was a future for him that had not yet come. It was becoming hazy and uncertain, and the Prince seemed to be losing it—how could one remember something that had not yet happened? Time passed like a man walking forward with his back to the front. And looking back, he saw his future, but as soon as he turned his head back to normal, he ceased to remember it, and began to stumble and lose his way.

The Empress tried to divide the Prince, as well as Caileena, and confuse him, but thanks to the locket, he was able to maintain a true sense of time. And now he has made the only right decision that allowed him to change this small episode in the past, which will change the future.

It turned out that now the very concept of time in the usual meaning did not make sense at all. It was like a tangle of insoluble contradictions. If he is now in his past, relative to his own frame of reference, then for him it was also the future, for he was reliving all of this, although most of the time he was not aware of it. A future that influences the past, which will turn out to be the future. And so on ad infinitum: time spiraled, and with it the Prince's consciousness. They mixed and became something unified. In this state of affairs, the sequence of events was not important at all. Sands are not the same as water that pours from top to bottom and sets mechanisms in motion. Therefore, ordinary cause-and-effect relationships can be so confusing that the mind refuses to perceive them. And it turns out that reality is here and now; the way the consciousness sees and accepts them. But this consciousness does not belong to any particular person. It exists on its own, interacting with people, intricately intertwining itself with the material world, creating it at each specific moment in accordance with its will and only occasionally yielding to man.

But then another realization suddenly collapsed on the Prince. And it was joyless—he remembered that the entrance to the Garden

in the present tense was blocked. A miscalculation that could cost him his life. The prince will not get there and he will have to improvise right now, looking for a new way or at least just a shelter. Maybe he could get into the throne room and find a time portal there to escape? And what else from the future trip to the Garden should he "remember" in order not to be caught by Dahaka?

But all his thoughts were suddenly interrupted by another door. The same one that blocked the entrance to the courtyard in front of the Tower from the Central Hall. How could he forget? Or was he just hoping that time had not spared her either? The prince asked himself these questions, desperately trying to find a way up, but in vain - the rock and the door were impregnable. His terrible dream, which he had on the ship, during the journey to the Island, came true. It was repeated almost identically, only not on the streets of Babylon, but here, on the Isle of Time.

The prince heard footsteps approaching behind him and, turning, took out his swords. He already knew that he was doomed. And he knew that Dahaka would crush him with one blow - he was not afraid of the Prince's weapon. But he had nowhere to run, and he only went to meet his fate. Gloomy and joyless, which in a second would swallow him, turning him into dust, into a fading memory lost in the labyrinth of time.

But the Prince's mind was still desperately fighting for his life, looking for at least some way out. The craziest, the most unreal, the most...

The prince felt a slight chill on his chest. Medallion! The prince grabbed it in his hand, tearing it from his neck, and frantically tried to think of a way he could use it in a fight. Is he strong enough for this? He tried to remember the last time he had managed to summon the power of the locket and scatter the enemies. Can such a blow destroy a dilapidated stone door? But at the last moment, he suddenly grasped a random thought that turned out to be truly insane. And, most importantly, the only one that promised success. He realized that if the past affects the future, then the future affects the past. This is an inextricably linked tangle of events, which does not have any one direction. Instead, there are hundreds of threads, pulling any of which can touch many others. And he threw the locket aside. He had nothing more to lose - even the most valuable thing in the world was nothing, a dummy, it was worth nothing.

In an instant, the reality around the Prince faded, and he seemed to have fallen into the abyss. Falling into it, he saw strange hazy images, saw many paths that still led him to one point, no matter what he did. But as soon as he opened his eyes, he found himself in a hall with a time portal, where he was imprisoned first by

Dahaka, and then by the Thing. He was transported back to the Garden, he came back!

The prince jumped to his feet and ran to the water arch. The exit from the corridor behind the hall was open! Not believing his eyes, the Prince walked over to him and slowly walked outside. This time, nothing stood in his way. The creature was not nearby, Dahaka remained in the past, that is, in the present. The prince could not believe his eyes, he could still feel the cold breath of the beast and his humble fear in the face of death.

The prince took another step and felt a sharp pain in his leg give way. He had definitely returned to the starting point. But he did not feel joy. He was stunned. Everything had gone against his expectations, and he didn't understand how he had ended up here, though this time he remembered everything, including his strange double journey into the Clockwork Tower.

He believed that he should not have been in this place and at this time. Something went completely wrong...

Chapter 18. Conductor

Well, it seems that I was too hasty in my judgments. It turned out that I could not travel in time before the moment when the portal was created. Fate itself opposes this. There is no way back - Dilmun will never be the same again. As beautiful and bright a place as it was not so long ago. I had a wonderful gift in my hands, but I did not know how to use it correctly. And now it is too late - I will have to live in this new world. But the struggle will be long and difficult. My descendants will have to complete it. And they will have the right to make a mistake, or rather, the opportunity to correct it. ***What I am forever deprived of - nothing but Peski will help, and I missed the chance.***

I noticed that moving in time is like moving in space – you can't be in two places at the same time. If you go to the past or the future, you will disappear from the time from which you came. But the traces of your presence still stretch in a string to a new point – the chain of Fate is unbreakable, it cannot be deceived by any tricks or tricks. As the earth sticks to your feet, so a piece of time remains in you when you move – you do not forget what happened. And you seem to live in your own special time, in which Fate acts. And in it, you can only endlessly run along your own footprints, not being able to erase them – time and space are woven into a single, inseparable thread. It seems that this explains a lot. But it does not make it more understandable.

Nergal has changed a lot lately - he has a sick and emaciated look, a restless gaze. Sometimes I don't even recognize him. But he says it's okay, he's just a little sick. And at the same time, he constantly runs away somewhere. He seems to be too obsessed with the idea of introducing the Sands into the human body, and it has a bad effect on him. Perhaps Nergal is in too much of a hurry and I should dissuade him. I came up with a better solution - to enclose most of the power of the Abyss in one relatively small vessel. My previous decisions to imbue items with the powers of the Sands have worked well, and the large Hourglass will be the crowning glory of my creations. They will be able not only to measure time, but also to command it! Such a concentrated force will be able to drive away even the waters of the ocean, preventing it from flooding the Abyss and the entire Island. A person who wields them will have unlimited power, but at the same time he will be at a safe distance – his body is too weak to be such a vessel. Their power will be able to solve any problem, stop any enemy, and maybe even restore the Island to its former glory. The sands of Time, compressed almost to one point, will become the center of attraction of the whole world, and then even

the ocean will part in front of Man! All you need to do is empty the Abyss.

But it will take years, this work will have to be completed by someone after me. Now I must take care of those around me. And especially about my son – I must not allow him to die because of his haste. The human body may not be ready for such a rapid transformation – it is too sensitive to time, collapsing and dying. I see a strange glint in his eyes. Nergal is hot and blinded by visions of Fate, the wondrous world of which he has discovered, and I must guide him on the right path. I hope I don't have to use the magic of time portals to travel back in time when he was still alive. After all, in any case, surviving his death would have been incredibly painful for me. Even though it is possible to turn back time, I will not be able to clear my mind so easily—it seems to live in a different timeline, where the concepts of the past and the future change their meaning and have nothing to do with reality. I must admit that the more deeply I know the mysteries of Fate, the worse I understand it. What is Fate?

Namtar's Diary, Entry 51

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Fleeing from the enemy, the first group, led by Rahim, found a breach in the wall of the fortress and all four - Rahim, Towfan, Iman and Navid rushed inside, hoping to hide. However, after running down a short corridor with no branches, they soon found themselves in a large elongated hall, and a single open door led them to the other side of the fortress wall. Ahead of them was the gloomy Watchtower. Rahim, who was the last to run, commanded:

"Let's run forward!"

He felt responsible for the team members, after all, he was the one who made all these fateful decisions over the past few hours. And so he risked more than the rest, ready to rush at the enemy to protect the others.

Soon the party crossed the bridge over the gorge (there was another one left on their left) and entered the tower. It was in a terrible state, time had almost turned it into ruins. Navid hoped that they could find a way out from the other side and ran ahead of the others, trying to find what they wanted as soon as possible. Iman, who followed him, looked somehow detached. On his face one could read not fright, but boundless surprise, caused by no one knows how. Maybe it was the echoes of a recent battle, maybe something else. Something that no one else had ever seen. The others didn't even have time to look around: Toufan kept looking back at Rahim, fearing

that he would die. Calm and confident at sea, he felt extremely uncomfortable here and feared that if Rahim fell, he would be the next victim.

"I see some light ahead!" Navid shouted.

He thought that he had reached his goal and found a way out of the tower. However, soon the entire team found themselves in a hall with a time portal. Of course, none of them had any idea what it was.

"It's a dead end!" Toufan shouted excitedly.

Soon there was a crash - a squad of the enemy, about a dozen sand soldiers, with predatory orange eyes and strangely shaped swords, ran into the hall, with a large wooden shield over their heads. Everyone except Iman prepared for battle, turning their backs on the portal and drawing their weapons. Rahim tried to pull him away, but he only moved closer to the cloud of Sand and began to peer at him, as if he wanted to see something in it. Or he had already seen it, but could not see it well enough. Iman came closer and closer, almost close, so that the sandballs touched and slowly enveloped him.

Coming to his senses at the last moment, Rahim tried to drag his comrade away from the portal, but it was too late: he, without hesitation, took a decisive step forward and seemed to melt into thin air, having only managed to say faintly:

"I see...

Meanwhile, the rest of the squad was also approaching the portal, but it was rather forced: the enemy was pushing them back. At some point, Rahim made up his mind and commanded:

"Follow him!"

He hoped that Iman had found something saving for them, and realizing that there was no choice anyway, he decided to take a chance, even though it was what he disliked the most. Reckless, rash actions rarely ended in something good, but he knew for sure what their attempt to fight with superior enemy forces would result in. And so he no longer hesitated and dragged the resisting Toufan with him. He believed that they were being driven into a deadly trap and was ready to fight to his last breath. Navid obeyed the order, and a moment later they found themselves in the same room, but at a different time. The surprise that seized them prevented them from immediately understanding what exactly had happened. In addition, they were more worried about the battle - the enemy would probably not stop and would soon arrive for them.

"I see...," Iman began. He looked even more detached and strange, and he spoke, raising his hands to the sand cloud.

"Let's get out of here quickly," Rahim interrupted, addressing the others.

– … ocean of time. Wave after wave, it rises from the abyss and covers everything around. There is nothing but the ocean and its will. We are only glare on its surface, sparks in the radiance of eternity! Iman continued, speaking a little more quietly. His eyes were fixed somewhere in the distance, as if looking through a portal and swirling sand, and his eloquence was stronger than ever.

Seeing the indelible impression that their strange, incomprehensible movement had made on Iman, Rahim grabbed him by the arm and dragged him away. Toufan and Navid were already running towards the exit, without waiting for a second command. Iman hardly resisted being led away by the hand, but he continued to turn back and mutter:

"We have passed through the gates of time... We are in the past! I feel his breath, I hear the music of eternity!

Soon, one by one, sand soldiers began to appear from the portal, immediately rushing in pursuit of Rahim's squad, which had already fled to a safe distance. However, the latter had a hard time pulling Iman with him, who continued to mumble something incoherent and he shouted at him:

–Focus! Now is not the time to talk nonsense! We need to break away from them!

This had only a partial effect on Iman - he fell silent and stopped constantly looking back. At the same moment Navid ran to Rahim's aid.

"What is it about?" Navid asked, when they managed to break away from their pursuers.

- I don't know, everything is talking some nonsense about time and eternity. He says that we are in the past! Rahim answered him.

"He's obviously out of his mind, but some of it makes sense," Navid replied suddenly.

–A what? Rahim was surprised.

"Think for yourself!" Don't these walls seem familiar to you? But they look like they've just been rebuilt," Navid explained.

Rahim did not have time to find an answer - the enemy detachment suddenly ran out from somewhere to the side. This means that they did not break away, and the enemy simply outwitted them. All four of them rushed towards the free exit, but then Iman stumbled and sprawled on the floor. Rahim and Navid managed to run too far, and were already cut off from their comrade. They shouted something to him, but he was in no hurry to run after them or rush into the fight. He only stood up slowly and looked around, obeying the strange feeling that came over him. It was as if Iman was unable to absorb what was revealed to him at once. Something akin to a religious revelation obscured his vision, and wherever he looked, the reality around him was obscured by a dazzling light that he saw

as an omnipotent force, without face or shape. It was omnipresent and all-encompassing. It was in each of the millions of glowing grains of sand that swirled around him in a giant whirlwind. At the same time, the enemies did not seem to pay attention to him.

The ghost stopped and looked into Iman's eyes. He saw something familiar in them. Something that gave him the answer he had been looking for for so long. Is it really luck, after so many years of fruitless searching?

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The sand soldiers chased the rest of the squad. Now there were even fewer of them, their chances of survival were literally melting before our eyes. Rahim blamed himself for the fact that Iman fell. He had to protect him, bring him to his senses, rid him of obsessions and this strange obsession.

Suddenly, after running through another section of the long hall, the members of the squad heard a loud metal clang behind them and turned around. For unknown reasons, the giant lattice door separating this part of the hall collapsed down and crushed one of the enemies, instantly taking his life. The rest remained on the other side of the bars. Their predatory orange eyes burned maliciously, literally burning through the travelers.

A moment later, the second door hit the ground, leaving the enemy squad imprisoned. What unknown force is helping them? A smile appeared on Taufan's face - luck was finally on their side! But Rahim did not succumb to this delight so easily and looked for some explanation. The fact is that, running into the hall, he saw some strange shadow that slid along the second tier and immediately disappeared. He hadn't paid much attention to it then, but now he decided that perhaps it was all about her. What if it's the Prince? Yes! He is alive and helping them, which means they need to find him, despite all their differences. They had a common enemy, and by working together, they could get out of this cursed island!

"I know what we need to do!" Follow me! Rahim cheered up, commanding the others.

The company followed him, and they all hurried away. There were no more signs of pursuit, and soon they began to walk. Rahim hastened to share his thoughts with his comrades:

"I have only one explanation for what happened. The prince is still alive and helping us.

–You sure? Toufan asked.

–Absolutely. In any case, this is the only reasonable explanation," Rahim hastened to assure him.

"I saw the same thing as you, I agree with your words," Navid said after a short pause. "But it seems that this shadow, or rather the Prince, ran in the other direction.

For the first time since landing on the Island, Navid had said something unpleasant, if not bad. Rahim stopped, but in essence he had nothing to contradict Navid - he was right: they had chosen the wrong direction. And they could not change it - the way back was cut off.

"Well, then we'll have to get to the fortress another way." We'll meet there! Rahim said after some thought.

His plan was once again hasty and highly unreliable. But this is usually what happens in conditions of complete lack of choice. And Rahim had no right to doubt and lament about this. Desperate times – desperate measures. You just need to be on the alert all the time.

***

The squad did not notice that the enemy did not touch Iman with a finger. He seemed to them a madman devoid of will and reason and was neither interesting nor dangerous. But in fact, he was anything but a madman. He was only unable to comprehend everything that had fallen on him almost in an instant. The whole old world crumbled to dust and was reborn in a completely different form. Everywhere he looked, he saw a powerful, boundless element, surpassing even the ocean in its majesty. It was as if she was pulling him towards her, calling him, emitting a soft glow, as if trying to say something.

The ghost felt that this was the right moment and stepped out of the darkness to meet Iman. In the worst-case scenario, nothing would happen, but he was unshakably sure that this time would be different. This time, the Ghost wanted to dispose of his lucky find in a different way. Instead of playing with fate, he had to save them.

In the blinding light that covered everything around him, Iman suddenly saw a silhouette that looked like a human. He walked slowly in his direction, becoming more and more distinct. After a few seconds, he had no doubts left - the voice of the elements came out to talk to him. Or maybe this is the element itself? Her personification, incarnated in a deity? At a distance of three steps, the silhouette stopped and waved his hand, after which the glow around him faded somewhat. Iman, who had been looking at the Ghost in awe, prostrated himself before him a few moments later, muttering something under his breath.

"I will lead you along a path that cannot be seen and that cannot be found by yourself," said the Ghost. To Iman, his voice sounded like thunder, ringing in his ears. He listened to him, timidly looking up at the Ghost.

"Get up!" And tell me, are you ready? The Ghost continued.

Iman obeyed and straightened up to his full height, but was unable to say anything. His excitement gripped him even more than before. He felt that he was on the threshold of something new and absolutely incredible, hitherto unseen and unknown. He heard the voice of infinity, felt the breath of the universe, and knew only one thing for sure: no matter what, he was ready. It seems that he has been going to this point all his life.

"I...," he only squeezed out dryly.

The ghost gestured to him that there was no need to say anything more. And he did not even expect an answer to the previous question from him. Iman himself needed this answer to finally understand where he was going all this time. Having walked and rejected the path of a warrior, a simple soldier, he found himself in this revelation, which appeared to him just a few minutes ago.

"Who are you?" Iman could not stand it and broke the silence.

"I am knowledge," the Ghost answered. – I am the pointing finger. Cast aside your past and you will become my equal. I will only show you the way.

Iman silently obeyed and followed the Ghost, who was originally only going to take him to the crew and help them get out of the Island together. But now he has already begun to understand that everything will happen somewhat differently. He did not even expect that he would be able to speak to Iman so clearly, and that he would hear him and listen to him. How great was the power of this strange, religious-like enlightenment in Iman's soul? It seems that his gift was different from that of Asha, surpassing him in strength and capabilities. He has yet to understand what he is capable of. And the Ghost will really only have to show him the way.

***

Rahim's detachment, passing along the rocks, found itself at a fork. One road went downhill, getting lost on a steep slope, and the other into a gorge with narrow vaults. In its depths I could see some kind of building. After a short thought, it was decided to continue walking straight - the probability of meeting the guards again, turning right, was too high. The ghost, who had left Iman for a while, led him out of his imprisonment and directed him along the right path, became interested in the structure in the depths of the gorge. It turned out to be a prison, guarded by stern overseers - sand warriors with a mace at the ready. It seemed that they were not only overseers, but also executioners, ready to carry out the sentence at any moment. But why was the prison guarded better than the fortress itself?

The Ghost found the answer to his question already inside. In addition to other prisoners captured by the Empress and her army in frequent battles for the Island with treasure hunters, there was someone who was kept under heavy guard in a separate cell, in a special hall. The ghost was incredibly surprised by his find. In spite of his knowledge of the timeline and how broad his vision, he had never expected anything like this. The ghost was so startled that it took him a few minutes to think. But the decision soon came to him: he would receive answers to his questions later, and now he had to change a little and complicate Iman's path. With his hands, he intended to correct another mistake and save another fate.

Instead of sending Iman after the party, he persuaded him to go straight to the fortress, taking a roundabout route through the Watchtower. Staying in the past was too dangerous for him, and the Ghost gave Iman the idea of going through the portal again to return to the present. He then took it a safe, though not the shortcut, route all the way to the Empress's library. The knowledge that the Ghost shared with Iman painted a picture of two times overlapping each other in his mind. He saw the vaults of the fortress around him, which had not yet known the burden of aging, and at the same time he saw ruins and ruins. It seemed to him that he was moving along the border of the worlds, not belonging to any of them. And only his mysterious guide was something real and significant.

In the library, Iman and Ghost accidentally stumbled upon Dahaka. He had no interest in them at all and just walked past. The ghost thought that the close presence of the beast might strike fear into Iman's heart, and hurried to hide him, finding a hall with a time portal. He transported it back to the past - not far away, the Ghost saw a rack with Namtar's diary, which Iman could only take while in that time. But the Ghost was in no hurry to bring Iman back immediately after he took possession of the book. He pointed to the extinguished torch, from which he pulled out a still warm ember and inscribed a message for Rahim's detachment. He urged them to return to the present, passing through the portal and going to the northern part of the Island, away from the fortress, on the coast. In support of his words, he depicted the seal of the king of Persia, a sign hardly known in these parts.

For Iman himself, this experience was incredibly strange – he was a simple soldier and had not been taught to write. But with the help of some incredible manipulations, the Ghost showed him the right movements, and the symbols came out by themselves, easily and naturally. And, with the same ease, he could read them, although before it was given to him with great difficulty.

"He is dead and will be able to leave this message himself," the Ghost said to Iman.

He wondered if the Prince was really dead. He was the most experienced warrior of them all, and Iman almost refused to believe it. However, even a part of what he managed to see on the Island was enough to understand how dangerous and unpredictable this place was. And, besides, he still immensely (and even blindly) trusted his guide and could hardly seriously argue with him. Rather, it was that not every truth is easily accepted by the person who discovers it. In the first moments, it can be deafening, frightening and incredible. But it is hardly less truthful, in the end.

Iman and Ghost then left the past, taking one of the torches and, at the direction of the other, went to the very top of the Mechanical Tower. There, Iman lit several fires, in a strictly defined way - so that they were visible from anywhere on the Island equally. This art could not be possessed by an ordinary soldier like him. But even an outsider could not know it - this was exactly what the Ghost was counting on when he gave the signal. Iman found some dry logs and built the necessary structure according to his clear instructions. The signal fire was built in several tiers so that the message would not be distorted even at great distances, from any angle of view. Not only fire and light played a role in the creation of the message, but also smoke: the combination of flame and smoke had a strictly defined meaning and helped ships plot the right course, including during battle, in order to bypass the enemy and strike at his most vulnerable point.

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The Ghost knew in advance which way Rahim's party would go, and the road winding along the Island, past the Garden (where they saw the Prince again, this time very clearly) and the high walls of the fortress, and finally led them to the entrance to the library. And he already knew in advance how their journey would have ended if he had not left the necessary message with the help of Iman. Everything was decided in a matter of seconds - they only had to hurry a little and they would have faced the Empress, who would have dealt with them in a couple of moments. But the message left by Iman delayed them, surprising and puzzled them. It was written on behalf of the Prince, who showed them a specific path and promised salvation from trouble. Naturally, they could have all sorts of doubts about the authenticity of the message, if it were not for the sign of the Persian royal seal - Toufan had seen it many times on decrees and various port documents and would not have confused it with anything.

And the detachment left this place, passing through the old part of the fortress, coming out along ornate mountain paths to the northern shore of the inner part of the Island. Exactly as the Prince

said in his message. It ended with a request to wait for him for several hours. What exactly this request meant, no one from the detachment understood. But perhaps the Prince had some kind of plan, and they could only follow it, Rahim believed.

Sitting down on the shore rock, he thought about everything that had happened. His soul was tormented by the fact that he did not save the lives of Iman and Farang. He knew the latter's father, and now he would not be able to look him in the eye. Though he was an unintelligent, even foolish youth, he was still a loyal comrade and had the courage not to turn back and run away. And, despite the fact that the Prince deceived them about the real purpose of their journey, much of what happened was also the fault of the crew members. First of all, the recklessness with which they went after some mythical treasures. The thirst for profit hardly led anyone to good. And this time is no exception. Secondly, quarrels and squabbles in the face of danger speak only of frivolity, inner immaturity. Even if none of them were individually, it definitely applied to their squad as a whole. But Rahim was in no hurry to share these thoughts with the others: now there was hope in their hearts, and he simply did not want to deprive them of this small joy. He will cope with the burden of responsibility alone.

***

The second part of the party, which included Nayzir, Madid, Hafes, and Haadin, also tried to escape at first. They ran along the top of the fortress wall. But it seemed that their pursuers were tireless and the issue of the fight was only a matter of time.

Chance helped them - they ran to a small tower, which were placed in large numbers around the perimeter of the wall. Hiding in it, they saw a staircase to the second tier. Quickly climbing it, they dragged it up and threw stones at their enemies, taking them by surprise. The sand soldiers were preparing for reprisals, but were rebuffed. Their ranks noticeably thinned out, and only after that the detachment decided to give battle to the enemy. Madid and Nayzeer were experienced warriors, bodyguards, who until recently served Haraz and knew how to handle weapons. Haadin and Hafes, the sailors, decided to act unexpectedly, using improvised objects - a thrown rope that once held the door, logs and the same stones. They knocked the enemies down, depriving them of their already small numerical superiority, giving Naysir and Madid the opportunity to finish them off.

A few minutes later, everything was over - the remnants of the enemy detachment were destroyed and all four Persians survived, escaping with minor wounds. But despite this, they definitely did not

want a second such clash. Everything that happened was rather a great luck, an accidental victory born of desperate measures, hopelessness. This is how a cornered animal fights, which unexpectedly discovers in itself a strength and dexterity hitherto unknown to itself.

The squad had no plan at all. They thought about going back and helping Rahim and his companions, but they doubted they would be able to find them. They could die, they could get lost and get lost. This risk made no sense at all and the team continued to move forward, away from the scene of the battle. Soon, as they turned out from behind another rock that cut into the fortress wall, they saw a bay and another ship. He was washed up against the rocks sticking out of the water, but he was not stranded. The vessel was definitely abandoned, but it seemed quite seaworthy. When the squad came closer, they found the ruins of a port or shipyard - it was also difficult to determine because they were badly damaged not by time, but by fire. Apparently, once upon a time there was a fire here and the place was abandoned.

Haadin and Hafes built a raft from improvised materials and the four of them headed for the ship. He was their only chance of salvation, unless history repeated itself. At least, they really hoped so, and still had no other choice.

The sea had calmed down, and it was completely calm. In the silence I could hear the splash of homemade oars and the heavy breathing of the oarsmen. Their stern faces spoke of gloomy thoughts that were born due to the ordeal of the last days. Even if they had the opportunity, they would not talk about anything now. These trials were too difficult for them, there was too little chance of salvation, of getting rid of this nightmare. None of them even wanted to be surprised or think about the unusual nature of the creatures they met. Everyone only wanted to put an end to their memory and never even think about what had happened.

Equally gloomy was the sky, hanging like leaden clouds over their heads. There was not a single light, the darkness only thickened more and more every minute. It seemed that a storm was approaching. Calm was the calm before the storm.

And then, suddenly, the silence was broken by Haadin's shout:

–See! The signal lights of Babylon!

The first to react was Hafez, who sat opposite him, with his back to the retreating Island, and therefore did not notice several bright points on one of the peaks of the fortress.

"But how is that possible?" he answered.

"What are you talking about?" Naysir and Madid asked in unison, after which Naysir added alone: "Are you talking about those lights in the sky above the Island?"

After these words, Madid turned around and also saw distant signals.

"It can only be Taufan!" He is an experienced sailor and knows this secret language well," Haadin explained.

"So they're alive?" Are you sure of that? What does his message say? Naizir asked.

"It's very short and only says north," Haadin explained. Hafes nodded in agreement and began to row with a vengeance, while Haadin added, "More importantly, this message exists at all. This means that the hope that they are still alive is not so illusory.

After that, Haadin also leaned on the oars, and Naysyr and Madid followed suit. The tense silence gave way to reassuring explanations from Haadin.

"We will sail to the north of the Island and there we will meet Rahim, Toufan and the others. These lights are often used in battles and show ships the way, the direction from which to attack.

The ship to which they sailed was empty, and turned out to be quite suitable for the journey. The tension finally subsided and was replaced by hope. Four people were definitely not enough for a full voyage, but on the wave of general enthusiasm, they managed to cope with the vessel and steer it in the right direction.

***

Leaving the past with Iman, the Ghost directed him to the prison. His find literally obliged to bring the matter to an end. The ghost saw a new thread, a new opportunity to rearrange the chain of events and make the most of the situation. Iman continued to listen to him blindly, to listen to his every word or instruction, although as time went on, the Ghost began to notice that it was becoming more and more difficult for him - the power of the revelation that had descended on Iman began to lose its influence on him. No, he was not disappointed in what he saw, rather the opposite - he accepted it so fanatically, completely saturated with it and believed that he no longer needed nourishment. He did not want to comprehend the truth, look for answers to many questions and become equal to the Ghost. Iman had found faith and now he was just following her. And when the Ghost's voice fades, he will still continue his path along the intended path. The way he imagined it, it was definitely different from the one the Ghost was trying to convey to him. And so the latter was in a hurry to complete his plan with all his might, tying the necessary threads into a single knot.

In the present, no one guarded the prison and, having overcome the rubble in the gorge, Iman easily got inside. The chambers were gloomy, damp and musty air wafted from everywhere, drops of water

fell from somewhere above, breaking the ominous silence. When Iman's eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness, he saw incomprehensible inscriptions on the walls of some cells, notes with days that were innumerable. Most likely, once here, people died without waiting for liberation. And the prison became a grave.

Prison seemed to Iman to be such a terrible place, a receptacle of pain and death, which was opposed to life itself, that he involuntarily wondered: why was he here? But the Ghost confidently pulled him along, promising something incredible, amazing. Something that was worth overcoming all this way for. A few minutes later, they found themselves in a separate room, which was somewhat different from the rest. There was only one cell in it, a little larger than the others, and some kind of glow emanated from it - at least it seemed so to Iman.

–What is this place? Iman ventured to ask, overcoming his indecision after almost a minute. For a moment, he was seized by a trembling excitement, and it seemed that something was about to happen that would overshadow everything he had seen before.

"This is the greatest gift. And you have the right to choose whether to accept him," the Ghost replied mysteriously.

Iman was silent for a while, coming closer to the cell and trying to see at least something in the mysterious glow, after which he asked:

– What does it consist of?

– This is the gate to eternal life. Are you ready to embark on a journey from which there is no return and no end? The Ghost answered.

And again there was silence. Iman was expecting some other answer, but this one surprised and frightened him. A tempting offer that did not make sense. His faith, a revelation that would never fade from his memory, deprived him of the fear of death, filled his short (by the standards of eternity) life with meaning. They gave him joy and peace, he saw his path clearly and did not want to turn away from it anymore. He was not ready to throw himself into the arms of a cold and alien emptiness, because he would never find the strength to fill it.

"No," he replied dryly. "I refuse, I want to remain myself.

Iman saw the meaning of life in its finitude, in the opposition of a brief moment, with all its fears, despair and fleeting joys, to the abyss of time. Never before had he seen his goal so clearly, never in his life had he been so sure of his decision. And this time, the Ghost wasn't guiding him—it was a part of himself, it had matured in him over the past few hours.

"All right," said the Ghost. "Then fulfill my last request." I want to give someone else a chance to make the same choice.

The ghost asked Iman to take out the book he had taken from the Empress's library and, once again telling him what to do and how to do it, inscribed on the back of the first of the blank pages several dozen symbols that this time were not even familiar to him. The rest of the book was made of the same signs, and between it and the one written by Iman was a page with a symbol that was now and then found on the banners of the fortress.

"Now throw it through the open door." And go away. I let you go! The Ghost said.

Iman, as always, listened to him and did everything exactly as instructed. But turning around, he suddenly asked:

"Who are you?"

He was answered by a faint voice from the void (Iman could no longer see the silhouette of his guide), which seemed to be moving away at great speed and slightly different from what he had heard earlier:

"I am the one who chose eternal life... Or rather, the one she chose herself.

Iman recognized the voice and froze. He heard no more, the glow faded and silence reigned, dissolved in darkness and the smell of dampness. But he didn't need anything else, he heard everything he had to hear. And now he has only strengthened his choice, finally and irrevocably.

The ghost, realizing that the connection between them was completely lost and even time would not have power over it, left. He had to put the last point of his plan into practice. For the sake of someone who did not choose eternal life and for whom it became a curse.

***

Farang, who had not come out of hiding all this time, was pretty cold and felt very hungry. His leg continued to hurt, and, moreover, fear shackled him, so for a long time he did not even dare to move or look out from behind the ridge of stones. His imagination drew horrible images before him: all the crew members had died and he was left alone in this hostile place. Most likely, his hours are numbered - he will die either of hunger and thirst, or at the hands of these terrible monsters.

What can move people at such moments? Despair? It only chains to the place, depriving you of strength and will. The desire to survive? Homesickness? All this, covered with the same despair, like mold, turned into nothing, an empty sound, echoing loudly from the high walls and drowning in the sea foam. The desire to end torment and meet death is what sharpens the mind and makes a person ready

for decisive action. Farang suddenly felt the strength for this last throw if he only accepted the inevitability of his death. His mind cleared and his thoughts took on a clear form in an instant. Wasn't that what the Prince had done when they were lost in the mist? He probably knew something else, but he pursued the same idea: to face death with courage, whatever it may be.

Leaping out of hiding, Farang winced in pain, but was surprised to find that his leg did not hurt so much, and death did not await him with open arms. And then he realized that life knows how to joke, choosing the third of two options, completely unpredictable and stunningly ridiculous. As ridiculous as he is... The situations in which he found himself, the words he said were stupid. He is like a child, and he is also a coward. And even lost. Life gives him a lesson: to think before he says or acts. Learn from older comrades. Wasn't that what his father had told him before he sailed? He, despite all his love for money, sincerely wished his son well and wanted him to become a real man, with a strong will and spirit. How many times has he put other people in danger because of his stupidity or inaction? Indecision is the main enemy of any undertaking. Any excuses, weaknesses, like a sore leg – all this, like an anchor, pulls him to the bottom. And most importantly - not only him. What if he fought alongside everyone else? What prevented him from throwing cobblestones at the enemies from cover? After all, there were plenty of them there! What a pity that his father's lessons and teachings found their way to his mind so late.

Farang realized more in those few minutes than in his entire life. It was as if he heard his father's voice in his head. His kindness and wisdom had gone unnoticed by him for so long, and now they were throwing a slight smile on his face.

There was no point in running back - he had neither a ship nor the desire to flee. Farang had indeed accepted his imminent and inevitable death. And since she was late for the meeting, he would find her himself. And deciding not to walk in circles, he noticed a hole in the wall above him and began to climb to it with all his might. However, his frozen fingers did not obey him well and it was very difficult to climb. Suddenly, stones fell from somewhere above and one of them hit the young man's shoulder. One hand fell off the ledge and he hung at a great height, unable to lift it back. Is it really that stupid? And even his death will be so ridiculous?

At the last moment, Farang suddenly heard footsteps nearby. Someone from above stretched out his hand to him (he almost reached the opening). A moment later, he recognized the savior as Iman. He literally dragged him in, and Farang fell to the floor. The danger was over.

–But how? I thought everyone was dead," Farang asked in surprise, not hiding his joy.

"What were you trying to do?" You almost killed yourself! Couldn't find another way? Iman said to him without answering the question. He was still amazed at how far-sighted his guide had been. This means that he took the book to prison for a reason at all - all this will still play some role in everything that is happening.

"That was the other way. I let everyone down... I...," Farang said without unnecessary emotion. It was difficult for him to find the words, but Iman understood him.

– Do not overestimate your own stupidity. Of course, you gave us trouble, but there were things much more significant. Fatal, I would say. And against their background, your behavior is a mere trifle. Moreover, as I can see, you have learned certain lessons for yourself," Iman replied.

"Thank you," Farang said simply.

He got up and shook himself off. Iman asked him:

"Can you walk?"

– Yes, quite. All is well," Farang replied.

"You probably want to know where?" And what's next? Don't be afraid to sound stupid, that's a good question," Iman said suddenly.

Without waiting for a word from his interlocutor, he continued:

"And I have a good answer to it!" Everyone is alive, we managed to find the ship and all that remains is to meet off the north coast. I'll guide you.

Farang noted the strange changes in his savior. His speech changed, became more insinuating and meaningful. Previously, Iman looked like an ordinary warrior - rude and for some reason always tired. Now there was almost a different person in front of him. What happened to him, and was he still himself? And was it really him? But in any case, he had saved Farang, and whoever he was, his life was now his.

"And what happened to the Prince?" Did you find it? Farang asked.

Iman smiled back and, after a short silence, said:

"Our paths diverged.

–What does it mean? Farang asked, puzzled.

The Ghost revealed the truth to him, and Iman knew all about the Prince's fate, but he only thought it important to add:

"No one who has set foot on this island will remain the same. Everyone has their own path, even if they did not choose it.

Farang did not fully understand what Iman was talking about, but decided not to bother him with questions. Perhaps he will still have time to realize everything that happened better and find answers to all questions. But in some ways, Iman was right - changes

occurred in everyone, it was indisputable. But what kind of change has happened to the Prince? Can death (and what else could Iman be silent about?) be considered as such?

A few hours later, the travelers reached the northern coast and, to the great joy of Farang, found the rest of the crew. They were incredibly surprised to learn that Iman was behind their mysterious rescue [*note: from the Persian name "Iman", meaning "faith"*], and all their assumptions were wrong. They thanked him and asked many questions, and he only smiled mysteriously in response. The only thing he said was:

"We must go."

And, anticipating Rahim's questions, he added:

"He won't come."

Rahim looked as if through Iman and only nodded understandingly.

Chapter 19. Victim

I constantly tell him that he is not ready, that the human body is not designed for this at all. Sand should fill a person's mind, show him the way, but not become a part of it. With the help of the medallion, I managed to find this path in the darkness - something that no one had been able to do before me. Prior to this, Sand had only brought illness and death, but only because of the wrong approach to interaction. I showed them the right path and now Peski is a blessing for people, not destruction. But I understand perfectly well where the tradition of throwing stones at the Abyss came from! People were afraid of her! For sure, initially someone tried to do it faster than one stone in a human lifetime. But over time, the ritual acquired more symbolic meaning than real benefit. People began to forget about the real danger. However, an incorrectly used tool can be more terrifying than a weapon in the hands of an enemy. And now Nergal is repeating the mistakes of the past. But he doesn't want to listen to me. And do I have the right to instruct him, if all my discoveries and achievements are a series of accidental enlightenments and luck, which I call Fate?

I have proven many times that the best way to harness the power of the Sands of Time to man is to penetrate things that are empowered by it. And man only uses them for his own purposes. And this is the main difference between our views. The point at which our teachings diverge. We strive for the same goal, but in different ways. I used to think that this was even a good thing - once Nergal convinced me of this. But now I am full of doubts, and every day our paths diverge further and further. And he even has followers, who are just as stupid. I can hardly reach him from the opposite side of this abyss. At best, he hears my voice, but not the essence of my words.

Where does Nergal's path lead? It seems to me that he can harm not only himself, but the entire Island, each of its inhabitants. He again began to constantly talk about the enemy who was about to attack. He says that thanks to the Sands, his memories have returned. And they are so horrible that he has no time to stop and think. But he does not see that he himself is bringing trouble to the Island even greater than the attack of an unknown enemy. I feel it looming over us, the breath of darkness getting closer and closer. And he only says that I am weak and fiddling with my trinkets, not seeing the real problems.

Once I found him near the time portal, but instead of the usual anxiety, a smile shone on his face. And our conversation went more smoothly than usual:

"Tell me, what are you up to?" Do you not see how you destroy yourself? I asked.

"One day you'll understand, Father. I have too much to do, and I have too little time, even though I can move between the past and the future! he answered.

For a few seconds, I even felt relieved and calm – we hadn't been able to exchange a few words for a long time. But he suddenly continued:

"The time has come to cast off the shackles of the human body – it is only a mortal shell. Weak and imperfect. Illness, hunger, fatigue – what's the point of that? You always wanted to beat them, didn't you?" But I suddenly realized that you need to fight not with the consequences, but with the causes! We are on the threshold of eternity, father!

His words were cold and confident. There was something inhuman, alien in his voice, and there were barely perceptible orange lights in his eyes. It seems that he really conceived something incredible, grandiose. But his methods will be inhuman, horrible and unnatural before he achieves the desired result. Is he really looking for the way to immortality, to eternal life?

It seems that I was too hasty in passing on all the knowledge to him. He was not ready for it... ***But did I know anything myself? Only crumbs, grains of the true wisdom of the Sands.***

Journal of Namtar, entry 57

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Falling into the void, beyond time and space, among other visions, the Prince remembered one very strange thing the most. In it, he was near Kaileena's cage in the Garden. He didn't remember exactly whether it was outside or inside her, but instead of talking, he was fighting her. She attacked him, and her eyes burned with rage and genuine hatred. It was the look that the Prince remembered most vividly, as it seemed to him that he did not belong to her, he did not recognize it. What could this mean? Another vision planted by the Empress to confuse him and confuse him even more? Or is it a dark omen, an echo of the near future, in which the Empress will cloud Kaileena's mind, bend her to her will, and force her to fight the Prince instead?

It was not far from Kaileena's place of imprisonment, but the Prince did not even dare to take a step at first. In addition to the fact that the strange vision depressed and disturbed him, he still did not come to his senses after what had happened. Something bad had happened – something he hadn't counted on. The prince thought that

he would be in a completely different place and even in a different time. He planned to catch up with his future in a different way. But the fear of death forced him to get rid of the locket, in the hope of changing the past, which would affect all subsequent events. If before he feared that the Garden and all the events that had happened to him were a complete illusion, now he wanted it to be a vision, a dream. But one circumstance turned all events into reality, giving an answer to all questions at once: he did not have a medallion with him. This meant that he had indeed gotten rid of it during his second trip to the Clockwork Tower. But he still returned to exactly the same point in time and space from which he escaped, being imprisoned. Nothing could influence fate and change it - this was the conclusion that suggested itself.

The locket, even though it was missing, was still inexplicably the Prince's point of reference for all events; he was something that determined the Prince's thinking and actions.

Trying not to accidentally attract attention, the Prince went back into the corridor and sat down on the floor, giving his sore leg a rest and immersing himself in thought. There was no need for him to rush to Caileena - he would not be able to free her, he would not be able to give her a medallion so that she could absorb the memory of her other half and gain freedom. Therefore, he tried to understand what had happened. Based on scattered conjectures and memories, the Prince formed the following picture of recent events: the Empress had originally directed him to the Mechanical Tower, where he had met Caileena and their conversation was exactly the same as it would be the second time. But on the way back, perhaps while waiting for the seals to disappear, the Prince lost his memory of the Tower and his encounter with the prisoner, and once in the Garden, he decided that he had gone here first. The Empress, trying to defeat the Prince in the Tower by force with the help of her servants, changed tactics and decided to cloud his mind. And events occurred that eventually led to the imprisonment of the Prince. Then, with the help of the medallion and the Sands, he somehow traveled back in time and relived the events in the Mechanical Tower. He was helped by fragments of memories of the future - most likely stored by a locket - and he tried to change the past. But the guardian of fate interfered with his plans, and the Prince was forced to get rid of the locket in a mad attempt to save his life. And in an incomprehensible way, he was transported to the very place when he was imprisoned.

The Prince's mind refused to understand this. If he was still alive, then the only possible explanation for what had happened was that the second trip to the Tower was an illusion. Anything could happen in it without affecting future events in any way, and then he simply returned to reality. But how then did he lose the locket, which

turned out to be payment for lost memories? It turns out that this explanation is completely untenable.

Another option was that the Prince had returned from reality to a vision. And he was in it now. This explained a lot, but it was completely disappointing for him. And it was this feeling of uncertainty about where he really was that most disturbed the Prince. He was frightened by the possible fate of remaining forever captive to this web of illusions and turning into a weak-willed slave like Haraz.

Or everything was an illusion. The prince was let into it and the door was slammed behind him. And no matter how hard he tried, he could not find a way out, but saw only a false, vague hope. But when the deception was revealed, it caused him even more torment. It turned out that he did not move at all and was still standing in the Central Hall, not really going anywhere. However, the Prince simply refused to believe in this option - he was too hopeless, and he could only die here and now. How is it possible to determine that you are inside an illusion? After all, it seems to be perfect, without a single flaw.

The prince remembered what Kaileena had said: the Empress's illusions could not be absolute, her consciousness inevitably mixed with his own, and she had to make incredible efforts to maintain the deception. In addition, she did not know about the medallion - it was the very thread connecting him with reality. After all, he had received it even before meeting the Empress. This means that the places in which the Prince found himself with the medallion were definitely real, real. This seemed to him the most reasonable and hopeful version of what had happened, which, however, did not explain anything. It turns out that if both trips to the Tower were real, then during the second he died and should not have been here at all. Or, if the loop did not close to the end, then he somehow returned to the first version of events, in which he proceeded from the Tower to the Garden without trying to change anything? Or did he somehow miraculously escape from the beast, but simply did not remember it? The Prince did not have a single rational explanation. He could only describe what had happened: it turned out that with the help of the locket he traveled to the past, interacted with it; but as soon as the Prince lost it, he was drawn back. At the same time, all the events in the past had real force, but had almost no impact on the result. Fate had kept the line of his life in its hands, preventing him from changing anything and, moreover, depriving him of his only advantage in the struggle against the Empress. Well, the Prince could only hope that this was the same place and not some other garden. After all, the resemblance could only be superficial.

But suddenly the Prince felt a surge of strength. He realized that the true explanation of what had happened was not so important. Even if the fact is that fate is so difficult to change that the results of any attempts go against all logic and common sense, then this does not change anything at all. Just another unsuccessful attempt. Or rather, it was simply not successful enough, because to some extent he achieved his goal - he got out of prison. He hadn't encountered the Thing this time, and now he could finally meet Kaileena, the one who belonged to the other half of her consciousness.

And with these conclusions, the Prince felt that an answer had come to him. It lit up like a spark in the darkness and lit up the darkness of his mind. The answer was still in the locket. Unlike ordinary time travel, only the Prince's consciousness was moved with the help of the medallion. Divided in time, it existed in several places at once. And with the help of the medallion, it could be in any of the Princes, quite really influencing events. The locket existed outside of time and space, as if at the intersection of all possible timelines, and touching it granted the Prince such an unusual ability. But as soon as he lost it, consciousness returned to its starting point. It seems that he has found the very source to which he sought. And from here his path only began.

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The prince walked over to the cage in which Kaileena stood. Along the way, he had to defeat a couple more guards, but now he was only truly afraid of how Kailina would meet him. He was prepared for even the worst-case scenario - to fight her if his strange vision suddenly turned out to be true. The Empress's treachery knew no bounds, and the Prince was no longer surprised at anything. Kaileena had her back to him, and he reached out to try to touch her shoulder. Hearing this, the prisoner turned in fright.

"You seem surprised to see me?" The Prince asked apprehensively.

–Who... You will? Kaileena asked, without changing her face.

This question and her surprise again gave rise to the darkest doubts in him. What if he somehow, contrary to all his explanations and guesses, disrupted the course of time, distorting its line so that he found himself in some completely different, alien to him, reality. And now he no longer belonged to this world and found himself in a whirlpool of completely different events, to which he had nothing to do. Suddenly Dahaka... right, chasing after him? What if his egoism is capable of destroying the entire world to its foundations, turning the timeline into an incoherent collection of fragments, depriving it of integrity and order? And then it is not surprising that people began to

forget each other, and events ceased to flow from one another, logically and consistently.

"What are you doing here?" Was she the one who sent you? Answer! Kaileena persisted, changing her tone to a demanding or even angry one.

The prince only wanted to ask her in response: "And who are you?" But he was too afraid of the answer. And he continued to look silently at the angry prisoner, who continued to pour out questions:

"How did she lure you to her side?" Do you think that she can be trusted, and she will fulfill at least one of her promises? She said angrily.

At the same time, despite all her pressure, Kaileena's gaze was still confused, she was looking for at least something to cling to. To find at least some answers and understand what the warrior standing in front of her was up to. At one point, Kaileena looked not at the Prince, but over his shoulder. The surprise on her face was replaced by interest - she was staring intently at something behind him. The prince noticed this, looked around, but saw nothing. He feared that an enemy or even Dahaka might sneak up behind him, but since there was no one behind him, the Prince decided that this was another oddity of Kaileena, whose consciousness had suffered greatly from the split, and hastened to calm her down, answering all the questions at once:

"You sent me here yourself. Or rather, your other half, to which a part of your consciousness belongs," he said. "I'm not your enemy, Kaileena.

The prisoner's eyes flashed with surprise again, even stronger than before. But Kaileena was not looking at the Prince, but at his arms crossed over his chest. Her eyes darted from side to side as if she were looking for an explanation, and her lips moved as if she were talking to herself. After a few seconds, she looked up and asked:

"So it's true, she managed to do it?"

"Evidently so," the Prince replied to her. "She tried to do the same with me. But she didn't take into account that you gave me the locket. He saved me.

"I hate her for everything she's done!" Kaileena's eyes were genuinely bitter and painful.

"He was supposed to help you too, but unfortunately I don't have him anymore. I'm sorry, I had no way to keep it. The locket contained part of your memory and would help you find yourself again," the Prince added.

"I have enough memory to remember her atrocities and wish her dead!" Kaileena said angrily, adding, "I don't need your excuses. If you're really on my side, then you should help me finish my job. Kill the Empress instead of me!

A silent question froze on the Prince's face. This Kaileena, compared to the one imprisoned in the Mecha Tower, said the exact opposite things. In a sense, it was even to his advantage, but it required some thought.

As if to answer his unspoken question, Kaileena said to the Prince:

"There were times when I sympathized with her and wanted to help. To save her from suffering and pain. But her madness... One day I realized that there was no way back and there was no forgiveness for her. But even then, I had no idea how great her cunning was!

The prince sincerely sympathized with the captive and regretted the loss of the medallion. Now it is unlikely that anything can help Caileena - her consciousness has indeed suffered greatly, was fragmented and torn apart in time. There, in the Tower, it was as if he was talking to Kaileena from the distant past, when she was younger, but at the same time remembered the Prince. Apparently, all this was a consequence of the division.

"These outrages and madness?" What were they? The Prince asked in reply. "I haven't seen much of what you're talking about. What did she do with all these people?

"Once upon a time, she didn't need them. These are her own words. And she dealt with almost everyone, but with her own methods. Regardless of rank and loyalty. Although, all this happened, of course, not overnight, but dragged on for years. Only I and Shadi, her daughters, did not fall out of favor. And that's only until I wanted to help her," Kailina said.

"What exactly did you do?" The Prince asked. "What could turn her against her own child?"

"I stole the Ring from her. He predicts fate and this tormented her, driving her crazy. I wanted to let her breathe freely, but instead I saw all the innermost corners of her soul. Her repressed memories, which she would never share with anyone. The ring was capable of more, and I saw her whole life. And even the time from which her black anger at people grew. It began as a child, growing up surrounded only by the palace nobility, where she was honored, praised, and even worshipped. But no one was close to her, she knew no friendship and was lonely. And her heart was hardened and soaked with darkness. In these memories, she was vulnerable, and she was furious when she found out what the Ring had told me," Kaileena continued. "And even I couldn't stop it. Although she did not immediately oppose me - she tried to reach me with someone else's hands at first. But when the Empress realized that there were those who supported me, she was frightened and truly mad. Now you are

the last hope of the Island, although I understand that you have come here for completely different, some reasons of your own.

"How can I defeat her?" What is the weakness of the Empress? The Prince asked. "You're right, I'm here to save, first of all, my life. But it so happens that my goal coincides with yours.

"Has she created the Sands of Time yet?" The captive asked.

"I don't think so. No, definitely not. I would have known about it," the Prince replied to her.

"Well, then you have to stop her. The crucial moment is near and she must leave you alone for a while - she will soon need all her strength. Go down the aisle – do you know where it is? Kaileena began to explain.

–Yes. There we met for the first time, and you gave me the locket. It belonged to Shadi," the Prince replied.

–It's cool. You must take the dagger - it is with its help that she will create the Sands and become almost invulnerable! Kaileena continued.

"I've been trying to do it from the beginning!" The Prince interrupted her.

"Take this ring. Only the wearer can take up a dagger that is divided into two parts. Just like people, it also divides objects. And if a locket gathers people together, because it can carry their memory, then it copes with inanimate objects," Kaileena finished, handing the Prince a ring with a large red stone.

"But how are you... After all, you are divided and I cannot even touch you or the Ring," the Prince began. But immediately he felt the weight of the ring in his palm.

"This is my gift. I still have the right to control my own life," Kaileena replied. A moment later, she dropped dead.

The prince did not have time to say a word, only froze with his mouth open with surprise and surprise. He didn't even thank her again. Especially now that she had made such a sacrifice to help him, even if it was for her own purpose. But fate decreed that it was common for them. Maybe one day, he would have time to think about everything that had happened, but now he finally had a real chance to influence the course of events by preventing the Empress from creating the Sands of Time. He will steal the dagger and thereby either force her to fight, or simply run away into the present. And then, even if the Sands are created, the Maharaja's expedition will not find the dagger on the Island, will not bring it to India, and the events in Azad will never happen.

However, the Prince was greatly impressed by Kaileena's act. She sacrificed herself, and it would be foolish to consider everything that happened an illusion, a dream. The heartless Empress would never have been able to put on such a convincing spectacle. To

consider what happened an illusion would be the greatest disrespect for what Kaileena had done.

It turned out that the Prince was a little right in each of his guesses, but he did not see the big picture. Until that moment, when the scales seemed to have fallen from his eyes completely. From the very beginning, everything that was happening was true. The Empress substituted reality only in small things, in details, in order to create the illusion of illusion. To force the Prince to look for a way out of where he was not in captivity, constantly distracting him from what was really important. And she almost succeeded. She was on the brink of victory. But she didn't know that she had given Prince the biggest chance of all in his life. And, to her misfortune, he saw him in this web of lies.

The Prince hurried to put the Ring on his index finger and set off on his way back to the Central Hall. He wanted to steal the dagger as soon as possible and get rid of Kaileena's gift. He immediately began to burden the Prince, secretly pushing him back to the path prepared by fate. But the Prince knew that he would not have to endure for long, and this was a forced difficulty.

However, he didn't have time to take ten steps when he suddenly saw a locket lying on the ground! At first, the Prince could not even believe his eyes. It seemed to him that he had found a more or less plausible explanation for everything, built a harmonious picture of what had happened, when suddenly one small element hits the very foundation and destroys it. Somehow, everything that happened around depended on the location of the medallion. But how did he end up here in the first place? Why hadn't the Prince noticed him earlier? It turns out that he did get here, after the second trip to the Mechanical Tower, having miraculously eluded Dahaki, but dropped it? Oh, what a ridiculous, fatal accident! And it cost Kaileena her life, even though salvation was so close! A feeling of deep resentment and bitterness overwhelmed the Prince from within. To some extent, he was happy to be reunited with the medallion, but not in the way that he was literally one step away from success!

Suddenly, he heard a rustle behind him, and remembering Kaileena looking over his shoulder without giving a hint, he walked forward and then turned around abruptly. Again, he would not have seen anything if the enemy had not decided to attack him," the Prince had great difficulty in seeing the faint, almost transparent silhouette that held a long dagger with a straight blade. A moment later, the Prince saw another attacker - the same invisible. And it was even difficult to tell whether it was a man or a woman, if not for the battle cry - the voice was female.

His enemies rushed in different directions and began to circle around the Prince, causing him to constantly lose sight of them. Their

invisibility made them incredibly dangerous and elusive. And at the same time, they could escape at any time - for example, if they were just scouts who would immediately report the medallion in the hands of the Prince. And about the Ring that belongs to the Empress. But as soon as the Prince thought of him, reality was replaced by a vision in which he knew in advance every move of his enemy, seeing him very clearly, in the form of a red and black spot against the almost white background of the garden surrounding them. And, having decided to use the enemy's weapon against himself, he dealt with the invisible men in a matter of seconds. One of them wheezed before she died:

–It's impossible...

And the vision was cut short. As abruptly as it began. The prince only thought that he no longer needed it, and he wanted to see the world with his own eyes again. The ring seemed to obey him, and nothing but traces of blood on the grass and a pair of blades indicated that a fight had just taken place here. Does the locket help him bend even this Ring to his will?

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On the way back, the Prince once again appreciated the beauty of the Garden, although this time he noted that it was quite different from the hanging gardens of Babylon. And, this time, he did not catch the same aroma. Although he wasn't sure why, was he different, or did he just not remember the smell? But now he knew that his feelings belonged to him. His mind is clear of the Empress's influence, and nothing will block his way to the Central Hall. The seals would be removed, and he wouldn't have to wait for them to melt, as Kaileena had once suggested. Now the Empress is busy creating the Sands.

Once near the fountains, the Prince dealt with another group of enemies. There were four of them and they were dressed in the same way as the caretakers in the Tower - masks of red cloth, whose top resembled a keffiyeh, leaving only the eyes open; A cape on the shoulders, bracers and a sash of the same fabric lay on top of a dark sleeveless suit. The prince managed to notice that the Empress's soldiers were divided into several types, and each of them had his own battle tactics. Their shape helped him to understand who was in front of him every time. On the one hand, this is a great opportunity for a trap. But on the other hand, his observations were confirmed time after time, without exception. And this one did not become so: every time the keepers tried to attack the Prince from behind, at the moment when he was occupied by one of their comrades-in-arms. And even in the Tower, the Prince honed his understanding of their tactics to such an extent that he used it against them - he playfully

dodged a blow at the last moment so that the sand soldier died not by the hand of the Prince, but by the sword of his comrade-in-arms.

The Prince cut off the hand of one of the two surviving enemies, depriving him of the sword with which he fought. After that, without finishing off the wounded, he dodged another blow from the attacker's back, finding himself behind him, and plunged his sword into his shoulder. The wound was not fatal, but the Prince noticed that the monster's skin was covered with a golden sheen and began to exude trickles of sand. And then the Prince struck another blow with all his might and sliced the enemy's body in half, cutting it in the waist area. The sword passed through the monster's body extremely easily, as if through water. And, at the moment when it crumbled into pieces, raising sand clouds, the Prince jumped through it and dealt the final blow to the unfinished enemy.

Until the very opening with the seal, the Prince was not disturbed by anyone else. He approached him, made sure that the passage was clear, and estimated the height for the jump - he could not just go down (and he would not have time for it anyway), so he had to run properly so as not to fall into the abyss. And as soon as he began his run, he heard Dahaki's heavy footsteps behind him. The air around him was covered with a gray-golden mist that exuded coldness, and the Prince continued to run with triple strength.

"Has the Empress already created the Sands? Is it really that fast? Or did Dahaka just learn to track me down in the past by seeing through my deception?" the Prince asked silently.

At that moment, his feet lifted off the ground and he flew towards the ledge in the middle of the Central Hall. But despite the fact that he put all his strength into this jump, it seemed to him that he might not fly - as if something was pulling him down. At the same moment, he saw the Creature walking towards him from behind the column! The prince hadn't expected such a turn of events when he would be attacked from two sides!

He managed to grab the edge of the ledge with his hands, but due to the height of the jump, the impact on him was too strong and the Prince almost slid down. His leg still hurt to climb up quickly. In addition, he hit it again, on the ledge, this time with his knee. And judging by the footsteps, Dahaka had already approached the opening and was ready to grab the Prince or jump after him. All he managed to do was pull himself up and throw both arms up to his elbows on the ledge.

The creature hurriedly approached the Prince and... I stretched out my hand, helping me up. Without hesitation, he accepted the offer, and the Thing pulled him up.

Chapter 20. Opposition

A huge weight fell on my shoulders. It was as if a whole ocean was pressing on me. I lost my son again, but this time for real, forever. He is not dead, he is alive and well. But today I learned that he was not blind in his intentions. All this time he deceived me, he deliberately did all his actions. And now time seems to have stopped for me, a moment of incredible sadness froze in my heart, deep as the Abyss itself. A moment after which times would begin even more terrible than I imagined. It will be an open confrontation, a life-and-death battle. And I may not even come out of it as a winner. ***I never had a plan for such an eventuality.***

In fact, I lost it a long time ago when it sailed away from the Island. He never returned, and these six months were a sweet illusion, a self-deception. I saw only what I wanted to see. After what he did, I no longer have a son. The island is in danger and I must protect it. There are only two possible outcomes: my death or his. There is no third option. And there is no way back - no Sands will undo what happened in it. At least in some ways, Fate is unambiguous.

All these six months, Nergal nurtured and gradually implemented his secret plans, hiding behind a thirst for knowledge. He educated his supporters, preparing the army for an uprising. And who knows how much more time would have passed before the secret would have been revealed if not for Jatta. He did not know that there was a special connection between us, which helped me to hear her even at a distance. And today I felt her pain. And through her eyes I saw Nergal, who was conducting some kind of experiment on her with the help of mirrors. What he had done to himself wasn't enough for him—he wanted to use the Sands as a means of subjugating someone else's mind. Moreover, it had to have a permanent effect, and for this it needed to transform bodies, impregnating them with Sands. As things that can be simply used. Fortunately, I was very close by, and I rushed there to stop this madness and save Jatta. Running up, I saw his predatory evil eyes, which literally incinerated me with hatred. And for the first time he openly expressed his thoughts:

"You've always been a problem for me. I'm tired of running away from you through the labyrinths of time, and it's time to throw it all away!

After that, this disgusting smile appeared on his face. That was its true meaning!

–Get him! He suddenly shouted to the soldiers who were standing nearby. He meant me.

Among the traitors was Zulu - the fortress guards were beheaded in an instant, and I rushed away, gripped by a storm of feelings and emotions. Resentment, bitter injustice, and even fear tore my mind apart. In an instant, everything turned upside down. I was ready to put up with the fact that he was blind and made mistakes. But I did not expect such deliberate evil and deceit. I didn't see this web of intrigues, lies, and betrayal weaving behind my back. And I fell into it as if I were trapped.

Jatta ran beside me, and we managed to escape from the chase, literally by a miracle. That same evening, I gathered the remnants of the garrison guard, my students, and the most respected people of the city, and told them everything, giving special orders. Now I don't walk around the fortress alone, only surrounded by a dozen bodyguards. Our enemy is dangerous, and only I have the strength to defeat him. Given what he is capable of, it is unlikely that anyone will be able to defeat him with a simple weapon. Now I find an explanation for all his oddities, our frequent unexpected meetings and his rapid escapes - he hid from me, but I constantly revealed him ahead of time and he went back in time to do something different and buy time. Now he has gained strength, people and no longer sees the point in hiding.

I've made so many mistakes! And it is unlikely that I could somehow influence him from the very beginning. But what exactly happened to him?

Namtar's Diary, Entry 60

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Namtar's suspicions that something was wrong with Nergal grew gradually. From small to quite serious, feeding, sometimes, on some completely insignificant trifles, which in fact turned out to be elements of a larger picture. Still, the realization came to Namtar too slowly. There was even a moment when he had in front of him all the necessary parts of the already half-assembled mosaic, but as if he consciously refused to believe in the conclusions that suggested themselves. He looked for other explanations for his son's strange behavior and did not believe that his plans were really so terrible. However, one way or another, everything was going to the point that he would have to believe. And the sooner the better.

Nergal returned from his journey extremely embittered. His spirit was broken, he wanted only revenge. The only reason he went back to the Island, aside from temporary safety, was for retribution. Day after day, it corroded his mind and heart, making them blacker than night. And Peski took advantage of this, at the moment when he

was weakest. They penetrated into his mind and were soaked in the poison of his hatred. It can be said that none of them alone would have become what they were now. They created each other, the power of the Sands of Time and Nergal's great thirst for vengeance. At first, he wanted to return and severely punish his enemies—anyone who had hurt or suffered him. But then his thoughts began to change and he realized how powerful the Sands were and no longer wanted to leave the Island. He wanted both power and reliable protection. And all the while, he lied to Namtar, albeit for different reasons. He said that he remembered almost nothing, invented some enemy, but at the same time almost nothing that would betray his true intentions. He said mostly what Namtar wanted to hear from him and easily gained his trust. Nergal soon decided for himself that Namtar was using this great power for completely different purposes. And at that moment, the Sands swallowed him completely. It so happened that his anger was reflected in them a hundredfold, changing and strengthening them, and they subdued his will.

In addition to anger, Nergal felt great shame in front of his father. He left the Island, literally spitting in his soul, calling him a madman, but all his own undertakings failed miserably. The magnitude of the failure that had befallen him weighed on him, inflamed his anger only more. And so he invented all sorts of excuses and insurmountable circumstances of great power. He hated seeing Namtar's face every day. To see his kindness to him. But Nergal pretended and endured. He wanted his father not to find out the truth for as long as possible. He wanted to precede the day when his great deception would be revealed by creating a new order earlier. One in which no one will doubt his power. And no man would dare to challenge him.

And, unlike Namtar, Nergal learned from his mistakes.

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Nergal had been a proponent of the idea of merging the Sands with the human body almost from the very first day of his return to the Island. In part, Namtar himself was to blame when he healed his son with their help. And over time, this idea only grew stronger in him. Namtar's attempts to imbue items with the power of the Sands seemed like a waste of time to Nergal. It's like having a whole river, but drinking from a puddle next to it. But, at the same time, Namtar, without knowing it, often gave him very interesting and valuable ideas, which only had to be developed a little. For example, fate – why believe or not believe in it if you can use it as an instrument of power? If everything around is subject to a strict plan, and he is the

one who controls it, is this not absolute power? Infinity is right in his pocket. Meek, obedient.

Unbeknownst to Namtar, Nergal was building his army, hordes of sand warriors who were difficult to kill with conventional weapons. They stayed awake all day long, strong and merciless. But this was not enough for Nergal, and he continued his experiments, looking for something special. And at some point, he realized that it was time to get close to Namtar. Not wanting to act openly, he decided to test the effect of the mirror bowl on Jatta. He was able to discern a connection between her and his father, through which he was able to peer into his mind. And in it he found what he was looking for. His plan matured almost instantly. After that, he tried to turn Jatta into a sand beast, but did not have time - Namtar found out about it and immediately ran to the Watchtower, wanting to stop this madness. But it turned out that having stopped one evil, he gave rise to another - Nergal stopped hiding and moved to an open struggle. And it is not known what was worse.

After an unsuccessful pursuit of Namtar, Nergal soon summoned his entire army and threw it into battle against Namtar's troops. He wanted a quick victory, but Namtar and his students and warriors were able to take refuge in the Mechanical Tower and push back the enemy. And then Nergal chose a slower, but surer path. He will grind the stone like water, until there is nothing left of it at all. Only instead, he will use threats, deception and force when necessary.

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The standoff had been going on for weeks, but neither side was going to back down or surrender. Many people remained loyal to Namtar. They risked their lives, trying to find out the enemy's plans and find his weak point. From time to time, there were minor skirmishes, killing Namtar's men, but Nergal's monsters rarely. The soldiers began to fear them, there were rumors and fables about their immortality and invulnerability. But this was not fully true - Nergal had not yet managed to make them so strong. They were not afraid of only minor wounds, blows to the torso were fatal for them, as for an ordinary person. But Nergal did not stop there. With each passing day, he perfected his method of turning into monsters, and the tales began to come true.

At the same time, Nergal took other measures that limited or weakened Namtar. First of all, he blocked the path to the time portal by setting up a triple ring of guards around it. He used it himself, sometimes going back in time and acting differently. Such tactics gave him an unconditional advantage. But it did not blind him - he carefully thought through all possible moves and their consequences.

He studied his mistakes - his own and Namtar's. Nergal knew that he would try to create another portal first. Therefore, using the staff that he had hidden from Namtar, he dictated his will to the Sands: the creation of other portals was impossible. Whatever Namtar did, his attempts would be doomed to failure, for Nergal had taken his own creation from him, taking advantage of his indecision and surprise. But he did it gradually, so the whole process proceeded more imperceptibly, and it was difficult for Namtar to choose the moment for decisive action. Meanwhile, people were dying every day; someone even blamed Namtar for everything - fear got the better of them and they left. They were unwilling to help Nergal, but depriving Namtar of support was essentially that help. This is exactly what he wanted. He knew that Namtar was still not ready and continued to press in all directions.

In addition to directly opposing his father, Nergal used other methods of struggle. His favorite was to turn others against Namtar.

"Look at what happened to the Island through his fault! – he said.

At the same time, Nergal literally isolated Namtar, not allowing him to justify himself or explain himself. Almost no one had seen him in weeks. And all this gave rise to various rumors. Someone said that Namtar had gone mad because of the Sands and wanted to destroy the entire Island. Someone believed that he died altogether. Taking advantage of all this, Nergal gradually justified his confrontation with Namtar, turning into the protector of the Island, whitewashing his any, even very controversial actions. His lies distorted the picture of reality, and Namtar did not even know about half of what was happening. Unable to leave the Tower, he was focused on creating an Hourglass, with which he hoped to trap Nergal and stop his rampage.

With some support from the stronghold's inhabitants, Nergal appointed Zula to a new position. From now on, everyone called him the Executor of Zulu. He was now in charge of the entire outer part of the Island. He had to collect taxes and suppress rebellions and any discontent. And in this, Nergal resorted to another trick: Zulu said that he was acting on behalf of Namtar. That fate commands him to arrange a new order. Those who were dissatisfied with the force were taken to the fortress and thrown into prison, or turned into monsters. If any of them managed to return, they were a completely different person. Fear settled on the Island, the common people cursed Namtar. And Nergal was a fighter for justice.

Once it even happened that one of Namtar's disciples made an attempt on his life. He was caught and expelled from the camp along with his accomplices. Nergal bribed someone from Namtar's entourage, and he, in turn, won over several more to his side. However, Nergal did not count on the successful outcome of this

assassination attempt. This was just another element of his game - petty squabbles and slight upheavals within Namtar's party played into his hands. Thanks to them, no one saw the scale of the coming changes and the danger they promised. No one except Namtar, who was stunned by her and seemed unable to move. He came up with one plan after another, and they failed countless times.

In time, it was no surprise to any of his troops that Nergal's soldiers had become very resistant to conventional weapons. It took three or four people to defeat one monster. But Namtar did not know how to help his warriors, although they had an excellent forge at their disposal. He did not immediately grasp the essence of what Nergal was doing to people. The hunch came to him by accident when he noticed an unusual orange glint in their eyes, which turned into two small lights during the fight. Then he realized that it was all the fault of the Sand - it soaks their bodies, mixes with blood and changes people, giving them power, but absorbing part of their consciousness. And the higher their power, the stronger the Sands wielded them. And the worst thing was that there was no way back, except for traveling to the past. There was only an opportunity to kill the monster, freeing the soul of the unfortunate soldier.

Namtar's hesitation was due to his constant surprise, bordering on despair. He did not believe that Nergal was capable of such atrocities until he had encountered them and then marveled at their scale. And again he refused to see the full picture, thinking that his son was no longer capable of more. But then he began to hear rumors from the outer island and everything repeated again. And each new act of Nergal was harsher and cooler than the previous one.

One day, it turned out that even before the confrontation began, a merchant ship had arrived on the Island. Namtar was, as always, absorbed in the study of the Sands, so the guests were greeted by Nergal. But such a reception could hardly be called cordial - he killed most of the crew, and threw a dozen survivors into prison. It was on them that he conducted his first experiments, but was discovered by Namtar. And then he used the time portal for the first time - Namtar from the past still had no idea about anything, and Nergal received the knowledge he needed. That was the beginning of what was happening on the Island now.

Taking advantage of the mood of the crowd, Nergal sometimes held meetings at which he convinced the common people that they had no reason to continue to tolerate the tyranny of Namtar. And for entertainment, he burned some books from his library, which caused the crowd to rejoice. Whenever Nergal left such gatherings and turned his back on the crowd, he wore the same sinister smile that Namtar hated. At the same time, with the help of the arbiter Zulu and other figureheads, he continued the dictatorship of fate, but no one

had any idea who was really behind it. Nergal gradually gained fame as a great savior. A deliverer from the plague.

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Zulu transferred a large garrison of guards to the outer island and settled in one of the Watchtowers. From time to time he went out onto the large balcony, having previously gathered almost all the inhabitants at the foot of the Tower, and loudly (he had a very strong and authoritative voice) proclaimed to them the will of Namtar. All discontent was suppressed by force and eventually stopped, forcing people to accept their fate obediently.

And although Nergal was behind all these changes, it was not without Zulu's personal zeal. He was glad to prove himself and release his demons. Like a dog that has broken free from the chain, he has guarded the peace of Namtar and his school for years, and he is pretty tired of it. He longed to influence something for real. His harsh temper all this time hid his true character. The Zulu were prone to oppression, intimidation, and harsh treatment. And now he was literally reveling in his power. Yes, even if the new order was determined by Nergal, and not by him, but it depended on him how everything would be done. And he was happy to destroy what he once guarded and defended. His face often bore the same cool smile that Namtar had seen on Nergal's face. But at the same time, Zulu did not dare to contradict Nergal in anything, being content with his position. He had quite a lot of freedom of action, and only the result was required of him - this completely suited him. And the title "executor" was generally invented by him.

Wanting to control the inhabitants as much as possible, Zulu forcibly relocated everyone to a settlement around the Watchtowers. Most of the crafts were abolished, and people were forced to do only hard work and grow and obtain food for the fortress. They themselves were left with pitiful crumbs. But to prevent people from dying of hunger and exhaustion, Nergal secretly continued to redirect the streams of Sand to the outer island. They were getting closer and closer to people and soaking their bodies. This gave them strength and, at the same time, made them even more submissive. Some felt the catch, seeing how everyone around them was changing, but were powerless to change anything.

For his own safety, the Executor of Zulu (whom his people hated as much as Namtara) ordered to fill in all unnecessary entrances to the Watchtowers, which by that time had already turned into a symbol of intimidation and oppression, posting a reinforced guard at the only door. Then he ordered the construction of a pyramidal temple - he forcibly forced people to worship the Sands. And each of

his visits made people even more dependent on them. They wanted to throw off these shackles and, at the same time, they wanted to be soaked in the Sands again and again, losing their minds more and more. Inner struggle was the only possibility of resistance that people still had. But they were gradually losing it too.

The island gradually ceased to resemble what Namtar had so lovingly created. All his dreams turned to dust. The island became a broken vase for him, the fragments of which scattered on the floor and he crawled in vain on his knees, trying to pick up the fragments that fit each other and put them back together. And all this despite the fact that because of Nergal he was tied hand and foot, and some people walked by every now and then, trampling and grinding this debris or even sweeping it away as unnecessary. And he himself seemed to be one of these wreckage.

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In time, Nergal became the viceroy of the ruler of the Isle. Some people joined his army consciously and voluntarily. And then, for the first time, they saw his army up close - they were only remotely human-like monsters, meekly following any orders and knowing no fear or pain. Nergal slandered Namtar, that it was he who had so crippled people by playing with the Sands. And he promised that soon he would be able to at least partially heal people by creating something special and correcting what his father had done. Nergal said of him that he was mad and was hiding in the Mecha Tower, not letting anyone near him except madmen like himself, preparing to unleash real terror on the heads of people. And from the outside, for those who did not know the whole situation, it looked exactly like that. Taking advantage of this, Nergal restricted access to the central part of the fortress, explaining this by concern for everyone's safety. Only his army and personal guards continued to be inside - a detachment of especially skilled and strong warriors. Nergal did not need extra eyes and ears at the time of the implementation of his plans.

Continuing to falsely concern for the safety of the Island, Nergal ordered the closure of the strait in the outer ring in such a way that only one or two ships could pass there, and only knowing the exact course. Any attempt to pass there at random would certainly end in a wreck or with the ship running aground. He explained this by saying that in this way they would be protected from any enemy from the outside who would sooner or later descend on the Island (he continued this line of lies). And, besides, this completely deprives Namtar of the chance to arrange an escape. Although, according to Nergal, he still had nowhere to run. The island was the only thing

that existed in this vast ocean, there was not a single piece of land anymore, and he was fully convinced of this. But even such a fate would be too small a punishment for Namtaru for all his deeds.

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One day, Nergal announced to the inhabitants of the fortress that a great day was coming. The one when Namtar's madness will end. The one that will bring something special that not only this island, but the whole world has not seen. He promised long-awaited changes for the better and his final victory.

"The countdown is given, and nothing will stop it. The Day of the Great Transfiguration awaits us all! He said to all those present. "The time has come to cleanse the Island of Namtar's deeds, let his bad name be forgotten!" We have almost come this long way, and it will soon be completed to give rise to a new era!

Nergal carefully concealed his plans from Namtar, hiding his thoughts and masking any actions. But, on the contrary, he wished that the rumors would reach Namtar's ears and distract him from important matters. These rumors were supposed to frighten and surprise him, forcing him to change plans or tactics of struggle. Confuse him as much as possible, slow him down and then push him into haste and wrong decisions. And the news of the Great Transfiguration was the most important of them.

In fact, Nergal was well aware that Namtar still posed a serious threat to him. Both his detachments and himself, personally. Their confrontation consisted mainly not even in a fight by force, but in a battle of wits. The genius of Namtar against the cunning of Nergal. And the whole advantage of the latter was based on a lie that could still be exposed. If he stumbled a little, he would have to take power by force. Nergal could handle that too, but it would cause a lot of unnecessary trouble. And it would have interfered incredibly much with the Transfiguration.

Chapter 21. Rendezvous with death

Our enmity has divided Dilmun in half. Now it is only the name of the fortress again: as the name of the Island, it has not caught on - after all, it too was divided in two by the flood! And my soul is also torn apart - I know there is no turning back, but it is still difficult for me to come to terms with the loss. Perhaps it would be even easier for me to know that he died at sea. How much longer will this destruction continue around me? what was dear to me is only endlessly broken in half, turning into ashes. ***I want to forget all this.***

Nergal cut off my way to the Garden, as if trying to break my spirit. He settled in a place that he himself had never liked. But he reasoned that it was much more important that I loved him, and Nergal was partly right - the noisy and gloomy Clockwork Tower was not the best place to live. Sometimes I make trips to my former chambers and to the library to be in silence or to find the book I need. But there is a forge near the Tower - it gives us an advantage in weapons, and therefore some chances to win this confrontation. However, it would be foolish to believe that there, in his improvised camp, he is deprived of everything and admires the beauty of nature all day long. He is extremely serious and dangerous.

None of us move alone, only with a squad of guards, and I have found a way to block Nergal's path to this part of the castle. In part, the destruction from the flood played into my hands in this - the sinkholes in the Central Hall, the collapsed walls - all this I used for my protection. Many passages were deliberately blocked - neither the Garden nor the Mechanical Tower could be accessed just like that - there were only a few paths left. Every day there are clashes between our people, but he waits and prepares for something more. Something great, though truly terrible, something that could undo everything I've achieved.

Yesterday I managed to find out what exactly. The mirrors that I created as a way of communication and a source of healing power, he uses to create monsters! Nergal promised his followers to make them a hundredfold stronger, but did not specify in what way. People approach the bowl, put their hands in it and look at their reflection, which is distorted by the Sand (once they did not know the way to the human mind and only killed his body). And the reflection seems to change places with the source – the person himself – and the Sand penetrates into it. But it does not kill - Nergal simultaneously uses its healing power, so that the next victim does not die, but turns into a monster balancing on the brink of life and death. But this monster does not know fear and fatigue. Nergal is building his army! Hordes of soldiers with shining orange eyes - the yellow-golden color of the

Sands seemed to mix with human blood and acquired such an unusual hue. They become monsters in which there is almost nothing human left, just like in himself. One day, Nergal will achieve significant success and also want to transform himself, becoming something...

I am preparing for the worst, for the most desperate measures. In the battle with the beast – he is no longer a man – you have to be a beast yourself. ***Otherwise, he will make me a monster, erasing my memory.***

Namtar's Journal, Entry 66

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Once at the top, the Prince pushed the Thing away - he did not know what was up to it, but in any case he was not going to waste time fighting or explaining with him, nor risking further by letting him get close to him. All the Prince had to do now was to get out of here as quickly as possible, without turning around, he heard Dahaka landing heavily behind him a second ago, with one powerful leap, without any run, overcoming the abyss that the Prince was barely able to do. Running past the Thing, he noticed some confusion in its face - it clearly hesitated. The prince turned around and saw Dahaka unleash his tentacles to finally grab him. This time he got incredibly close to it. So much so that it is about to seize it and destroy it, restoring the normal course of time. But even before that, the Prince was filled with fear – he suddenly realized what was happening and did not understand why he was still alive at all. Now he has nowhere to hide, there is no longer a relatively safe past where he could take a break from the constant pursuit. Now the monster is chasing him here too. Everywhere. The Empress had completed the creation of the Sands of Time perhaps just a minute ago, but now his life would turn into a real nightmare. Although, probably, it will not last long.

Wanting to save himself from certain death, the Prince dove forward to roll over his head to dodge the monster's attack. And at the same moment that he was back on his feet, the Prince saw that Dahaka had been grabbed by the Thing. It is unknown if this was a mistake or not, but Dahaka stopped chasing the Prince, and absorbed the Thing, which he had attracted with his tentacles. Immediately afterward, the Prince, who had not noticed that he had stopped while watching what was happening, saw the monster hurry away, jumping over the abyss and heading towards the Mechanical Tower.

All these events lasted no more than ten seconds, but it seemed to the Prince that they dragged on for hours. He stood, unable to move, staring at the eye depicted on the gate leading to the throne

room. Behind them, the Empress will soon create the Sands of Time. But while he is still alive; this time, Dahaka hadn't come for him, which was the hardest thing for him to believe. But this also inspired him, gave him hope again, literally intoxicated. His life still belonged to him, although after what had happened, the Prince was not sure if this was the same life. After such a miraculous salvation, it seemed to him as if he had been born again. Maybe those who say that death is the beginning of a new life are right?

The prince tried to tone down his delight as quickly as possible. Even though his success was almost tangible, his joy was still premature. With an effort of will, he forced himself to turn around and head for the stairs, concentrating on more important things. As he walked down the aisle, the Prince thought only that Kaileena's sacrifice had not been in vain—he still had a chance, and now, in the face of death, he valued it more than ever. He, at all costs, must be in time! But what a pity that he would not be able to help her or thank her...

The prince was inclined to think that the only vision in all this time was his journey to the throne room, but even that wasn't particularly false. In this vision, he saw the Clock, which would soon contain the Sands of Time, just as he remembered it from the time of the incident in Azad. And on this day, the Empress was most vulnerable and weak. And also incredibly evil, because she needed strength and attention to complete her work, and instead she had to deal with the Prince, trying to confuse him, cloud his mind or even destroy him. Therefore, she only had the strength to distort the picture of the world around him in small things, such as the sun that did not move from its place or water flowing upward contrary to its nature.

The pain in his leg prevented the Prince from running as hard as he could, but he adapted to this as well - he placed his foot in a special way, trying not to bend and straighten his knee too sharply. In order to survive, he had long accustomed himself to adapt to any intrigues of fate, no matter how much it tested his strength. He could only believe that it was not forever. And that he would be able to find his way to the altar a second time, because the first time he was led only by rage when he chased Shadi.

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Once in the ceremonial hall in front of the altar, the Prince remembered the first time he had seen the Thing. At the time, he did not pay attention to it, but it eventually affected his journey through the Island. And instead of interfering with the Prince once again, it suddenly helped him, if it didn't save his life at all. Why? But it seems

that he will never find answers to his endless questions. It is unlikely that the Empress will be so kind as to tell the Prince about all the secrets of the Island and recent events before the fight. And the Creature itself was simply dead.

Climbing the stairs to the altar and catching his breath, the Prince briefly clung to a random thought: cowardly to avoid a battle with the Empress. Despite her vulnerability, she could be like a wounded beast that would desperately fight for her life until her last breath. It would be enough for him to take the dagger in due time and leave the Island of Time as soon as possible. Then he would solve several problems at once: with the Sands (and, therefore, with Dahaka), and with the Empress, and even with the impending arrival of Maharajah, who was going to take some of the relics of the Island with him. And he was still going to get rid of the Ring as soon as possible by throwing it into the abyss over which the altar was located.

But the Prince was well aware that this was only an accidental, stupid dream. After all, in fact, nothing will prevent the Empress from creating another dagger. Perhaps this will anger or slow her down, but fate is stubborn and inexorable and will find a way to return to its course in a few thousand years. And for the Prince, absolutely nothing will change. He will remain captive to circumstances and his own mistake. The solution he is looking for is unlikely to be so easy and obvious. There will be a battle, and he should hammer this idea into his own head as much as possible, so that when he meets the Empress, he does not find himself in the power of her spell and does not change his mind.

Determined, he walked up to the altar to find that the dagger where he had seen it last time was gone. It seemed that he had been here a second ago, but it seemed to melt into thin air. A slim chance that turned into a vision, a pipe dream. A simple memory that melted like a fog almost before his eyes. And he wasn't even sure if it was real - in this place, you couldn't be sure of anything!

Minutes counted. The Empress has taken the dagger and everything will happen soon! The prince was still on the verge of complete failure, but this time was different. It is one thing when everything depends on his ingenuity or speed, and another thing when only on the passage of time, which is beyond his control.

"No, wait! The Prince muttered. A new idea flashed in his eyes, but it took him a few seconds to realize it.

The fact was that he had a medallion with him, and it was also close to the time portal. As soon as he went to the present, time in the past seemed to stand still, waiting for the Prince at the same point where he had left him. And he didn't care about Dahaka anymore - he would come for him one way or another, perhaps in a

minute. The prince decided to go to the present and find, at all costs, the entrance to the throne room, and only then return to the past. And then he would have at least a few moments to prevent the Empress from performing the fatal rite.

Without any regret, he pulled the Ring from his hand and threw it into the Abyss. Surely he was the same heavy burden for Kaileena, who lost her zest for life because of him. The prince remembered well how the sparkle in her eyes faded and she turned into a pale copy of herself. And he did not want the same fate for himself - he needed the strength to escape from Dahaki, for which, this time, he was mentally ready. He was even determined to overcome the pain in his leg. And he will need even more strength for a quick battle with the Empress.

The path to the portal was again hidden behind the wall behind the pedestal. This time, the Prince decided not to immerse himself in the visions, but to repeat what he saw for the first time. He had the key and he knew which door he was opening. He grabbed the locket and lowered it into a recess in the center of the altar, squeezing it in his hand and concentrating on the thought of the Sands' attraction. In a second, he suddenly felt an incredible lightness in his whole body and even with his eyes closed, he saw a bright golden glow around him, which was reaching out to him in millions of sparks. And most of all, the Prince was surprised that this time the Sand warmed him, and did not pour cold on him. This warmth spread down his leg, healing him and relieving pain. And he himself seemed to sink down, plunging into some invisible pit in the center of the altar. Or did the floor bend so much under the influence of the medallion? Unable to open his eyes, the Prince felt his fall accelerate, though he still felt a support beneath him. All this was completely different from what had happened to him last time. He was sucked into some abyss.

But suddenly, at one point, everything stopped, and the Prince felt as if he had landed after a long fall, albeit very gently, as if he had not gained speed. Immediately afterward, he felt that he was finally able to open his eyes. The prince raised his head and found himself in the throne room, right next to the Hourglass. And at the same moment, he saw the frightened and surprised look of Kaileena, who was standing nearby with her back to the Prince. A dagger flashed in her hands, and it was clear from the expression on her face that she had not expected to see the Prince at this time and place.

"So you're the Empress?!" The Prince roared. In an instant, all illusions collapsed, and the grandiose deception was finally revealed.

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The ghost stood between Prince and Kaileena and watched them. At the very moment when the Prince was filled with

resentment and rage, and Kaileena, caught by surprise, turned to the unexpected guest in confusion. Her eyes were genuinely frightened. The ghost could easily stretch out this moment, turning it into an eternity. Time didn't matter to him – it allowed him to study events from any angle. But sometimes one moment was more important than anything else. And now, when it froze, the Ghost could read it like a book and find the answers he wanted.

From the very beginning, he had been watching Kaileena and her skillful lies. But he was looking for the truth. I wanted to understand what drives her and the way she thinks. The ghost did not know her nature, but she was definitely not an ordinary person. A creature of the Sands or their creator, she could be in several places at the same time. But not in the way she described it to the Prince on behalf of the Empress, but in a slightly different way. She found a way to expand her consciousness so that she could observe not only the present moment, but others that were distant in time. Her consciousness, almost merged with the Sands, spread like a thick spot along the timeline, and was the same for all her predecessors and continuations at once, to a greater or lesser extent. She had a mental connection with herself in another time. As if one consciousness for several people. A single mind that allowed her to look ahead and cut off the mistakes of her future selves, choosing the most prosperous options. When the Prince visited her, as a prisoner, in the Tower and in the Garden, she was not there as a "half", but in each of the cells in the full sense of the word – her body was there entirely. But its consciousness is only partially. It was simultaneously in the second cage, with the so-called other half, and in the throne room, near the Clock. At the same time, this happened only for herself and her special consciousness, in the system of counting time, in which she herself was the starting point. And the line of its time seemed to go at an angle to the normal one, and not parallel to it.

Meeting the Prince at the altar, Kaileena, fearing him, hastened to take refuge in the throne room, and, with the help of visions, forced him to walk from one end of the Island to the other. At the right moment, she would leave the hall and head to the Tower or Garden using secret passages, and return when the Prince left her with another batch of lies. At the same time, she was in a safe time and place and could, easily calculating any development of events, continue to lead the Prince by the nose and calmly engage in the creation of the Sands of Time.

In order not to give herself away, Kailina had to resort to various non-trivial tricks. For example, she hadn't told anyone her name before, at least not since she was young. But those people who knew him were long dead. Everyone else knew her as the Empress - both enemies and allies. So it was with Maharaja when he arrived on the

Island. And through Zoroaster, the Prince also learned about it. Realizing this, she deliberately revealed her name to him, knowing that she would either die herself and then it would not affect anything, or kill the Prince before he could tell anyone else. Seeing through the Prince, Kaileena invented a legend about the evil mother-Empress and her faithful second daughter, Kaileena's sister. All this bribed him and won him over to her side, making him believe in deception.

But the Prince was not as easily suggestible as she had hoped. Or rather, not in everything. Kaileena tried to convince him that he himself seemed to be divided in two. Moreover, she never told him about it directly, but made him guess on his own - one of the best ways to persuade. But the Prince, contrary to her expectations, managed to use the medallion correctly and restore the correct sequence of events, distinguishing the future from the past. Kaileena didn't see it and didn't realize it until it was too late. Through the prism of her perception of time, the events were seen by her in such a way as if the Prince had really been torn in two and more and more bogged down in this abyss of deception. The usual time in the projection on her mind looked like it was impossible to see the difference between the expected and real actions of the Prince - everything merged into one point. It turned out that she was partly deceiving herself. And so, when the Prince was able to revisit the Tower with the help of the locket, and then, after getting rid of it, get to the prisoner in the Garden, Kaileena was extremely surprised. Because the events seen by the part of her mind in the Garden looked ambiguous. It was as if she saw two versions of what was happening at once, but no longer in the usual sense for herself, but as if events and images overlapped with each other, one reality replaced the other: in one, the Prince did not come to her cage in the Garden at all, and in the other, he came, but without a medallion. And this also puzzled her very much. In doing so, the Prince created a contradiction, something impossible in Kaileena's opinion, which was what caused such surprise on her face when he touched her shoulder in the Garden. She skillfully turned him into a new lie, saying that she did not recognize the Prince, but in reality, she realized that she was not in control of the situation. Of course, it was not difficult for her to mislead the Prince and fake her own death. But it turned out that after all the attempts to get rid of him, she returned to her original idea: to force the Prince to leave. She couldn't beat him, and she was really afraid of fighting him. And Kaileena certainly did not expect the Prince to be able to find the medallion again - it was her own fault that she had created the illusion of its special value to the Prince - which he did not fail to use. It turned out that the medallion opened a secret passage between the altar and the throne room, which had

been made by someone many years ago. At their first meeting, the Prince did not use it, because the vision inspired him with a different picture and opened the way to the portal of time. But the Prince remembered it and, to his luck, was able to repeat it in reality, instantly ruining all the plans of the Empress. And if she had been completely safe in the Garden and in the Tower, protected not only by skillful deception, but also by the connection of consciousness with herself from another time in which she had taken refuge in the throne room, now she was almost defenseless. The prince took Kaileena by surprise, at a moment when all her consciousness was in one body and was not divided in time - no trial attempts and defense mechanisms. Just her and the Prince, one-on-one.

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In the silence that followed, the Prince could hear Kaileena breathing rapidly and heavily. But she quickly recovered from her surprise and was now feverishly trying to figure out what to do in this situation. Up to this point, it seemed to her that she was on the right track, and all her plans were quite ingenious and really worked. But the Prince, with one of his appearances, crossed out everything in an instant.

"Is it really true?" thought Kaileena.

And then she felt a wave of rage boil within her, a word in response to the Prince's anger. How dare he challenge her? She couldn't think of anything better than throw a dagger at the Prince and run to the weapon. Hot, he probably won't pay much attention to it, but the throw will delay him for a few seconds.

The prince jumped to the side, and Kaileena was already finishing her run up the arched staircase and was about to disappear from sight. With a quick glance at the dagger, the Prince chose the chase - nothing could be more important than this fight now. The one to which he was literally forced.

As he ascended to the next tier, following the Empress, he saw the throne at the end of the hall, which he already knew, and the figure of Kaileena in the background, with her back turned to him. She took two swords of unusual shape, with blades curved forward, and crossed them above her head. After a moment, she turned to the Prince, a smirk like Shadi's had on her face, but only for a short time. Caileena, realizing that no lie made sense now, said to the Prince:

"There is only one truth: only one of us can cheat his fate today!"

And with that, she rushed at him, striking blow after blow with her swords. The prince was in no hurry to counterattack, he wanted to study his enemy first. However, he quickly realized that Kailina was physically weaker than Shadi - she was used to her doing all the

dirty work for her. Fighting wasn't her strong suit. But the Prince noticed something different in the Empress's behavior: she, unlike Shadi, did not play with her opponent. She fought desperately for her life.

The prince easily blocked all her blows, throwing the attacker away from him at those moments when her pressure became too insistent. His anger had waned, and now it seemed to him that if he went on the offensive and showed all his strength (which was a mistake in itself!), their duel would look more like a massacre, unless she had some surprise in store.

Kaileena quickly ran out of steam after another series of attacks and walked around the Prince, glaring at him. He wanted to understand what had happened, and her words about fate made him think. He had no doubt that she was speaking and acting sincerely, at least until she came up with a new plan or trick. The Prince didn't know much: he only knew what Kailina had said was a lie and what was not. She was not lying when she said that she was not capable of full-fledged suggestion - there would still be some small flaw in it. It may even be necessary to maintain the integrity of the deception. A contradiction that does not destroy the overall picture, but on the contrary serves as a missing element. That is exactly what she was. And her fear of a direct clash with the Prince. She had done her best to conceal it, but now that the truth had been revealed, this piece of the puzzle was completing an entirely new picture in which the Empress wished to get rid of the stranger on the Island. But, is it really the first time she encounters someone from the outside world? For sure, the Island has been attacked many times. But the Prince didn't want to ask the question directly, waiting for Kaileena to say what he wanted to find out.

– What was this whole performance about? he asked.

"Didn't you like it?" Kaileena replied with a contemptuous smile. "It seems that you really believed everything you heard.

"It's not very pleasant to be a fool, you know! The Prince answered her. "All this time I thought that I was helping you, and you were helping me.

–You will? Did he help me? Come on, I've seen right through you from the beginning: you're only fighting for your life. Otherwise, why did you let me die? Kaileena continued to sneer.

"Your tricks won't work this time!" The Prince said angrily. "I'm not to blame, and you won't be able to anger me any more than I want to!"

Kaileena stopped and stared at the Prince. After a moment, she answered his original question:

"I advised you to leave the Island, but you refused. Then I figured out how to put you in even greater danger and new trials. But

you kept coming back time after time, safe and sound. And then a curiosity awoke in me: if you could go this far, then perhaps I will be able to change my fate?

"But what does it have to do with me?" Why did you try to drag me into these strange visions and, in the end, get rid of me - it doesn't matter if with the help of Shadi, Dahaki or...," the Prince began, but was interrupted by Kaileena:

"Or the locket whose power I turned against you. He was bewitched so that I could throw you illusion after illusion, confuse you and drag you to destruction," she said, adding: "And watch your every move.

The prince had completely forgotten about the locket! He got so used to it, considering it valuable, that he had already forgotten how he got it. Of course! Why else would Kaileena give it to the Prince? He hurried to throw it away, although he had some doubts.

"So you've been playing for time studying me?" The Prince asked. "But shouldn't you have been creating the Sands all this time?"

"I've never left this room!" Kaileena answered. "But I wouldn't be distracted by trifles - you opened the door to the unknown. And I had to follow you!

The Empress was a little disingenuous, saying that she had stayed near the Hourglass all the time. Part of her consciousness was indeed here, but the rest existed in the future, during each of her encounters with the Prince, where Kaileena actually came herself, in the flesh, and not as an illusion. It is not known with what attempt she managed to successfully act out each of the scenes, but she still achieved her goal, returning to the throne room in complete safety over and over again.

"But why did you try to get rid of me?" I didn't mean to attack you, it was you who turned me against you! The Prince asked in annoyance. "And how could it help you?"

– I have already said that I have read the timeline and know my fate. It is that I must die by your hand! But looking at you, I decided that I should try to change it too! Kaileena finally explained.

The prince guessed her plan. If she had studied it before, then why wouldn't she continue to do it now? And, perhaps, he underestimated Kailina as an opponent in vain. She might have been weaker than him, but that didn't mean she didn't have any tricks in store. All this was just another pretense.

After finishing her last sentence, Kaileena went on the attack again. Her movements became a little sharper and more confident. But she was still filled with despair, fighting with all her might for her life. It seemed that she put all her strength into each blow. The prince began to notice that Kaileena was moving faster and faster by

the minute. And soon he could no longer explain it by her desire to survive at all costs. As far as he had time to study it, Caileena was unable to move at such a speed. Even he himself could not do this. Nevertheless, it was happening, it was quite real and was beginning to pose a threat to the Prince - he could no longer keep up with the enemy and constantly retreated, back to the stairs to avoid the Empress's swords. And now she is a strong player in this battle, who rains down a hail of blows on the Prince, who has already miraculously defended himself from them.

And then, suddenly, he understood! Kaileena didn't speed up herself, she slowed down the Prince. His body and his mind were inhibited by the magic of the Sands, against which he was defenseless. And thanks to this, the enemy began to surpass him. The critical moment was about to come when he would be completely unable to resist the onslaught of the Empress. His swords were useless here, Kaileena's magic made him so slow and clumsy that he could simply not have time to react and deflect another blow.

What could he oppose to it? Only another surprise, which was not part of her plans. What if the medallion was not so useless and dangerous after all? After all, the Prince was here, to her great displeasure, with his help. Kaileen believed that he had lost it, but the locket was miraculously found, and it is unlikely that it happened thanks to her. Now, fearing that the Prince might use it, she had convinced him that the locket was dangerous to him! But he had helped out so many times that the Prince really had every reason to believe that this time he would prove to be his salvation.

Without another moment's hesitation, each of which dragged on for an endless time—his body and mind still felt the effects of the Empress's magic to varying degrees—the Prince rushed back to the place where he had thrown the locket. He tried to guess the Empress's attacks in advance - his experience and luck were his only allies in this unequal battle. Kaileena guessed too late what the Prince intended to do, and he managed to regain possession of the locket quite easily. He placed it under his chest armor - the necklace was torn, but he did not feel any effect. The locket was useless without the will of the one who put it on and responded only when he felt it, knew the intentions of the owner. It was only when the Prince tried to imagine that time was speeding up and he was once again moving on par with Kaileena, that the locket gave way and the Empress's attacks began to slow down.

She did not expect that the Prince would be able to use the magic of the medallion. She had always believed that this skill required some training, and she didn't know that the Prince had interacted with a dagger before, and he knew something about it. In a sense, the medallion was very similar to a dagger: the touch and

will of the wearer allowed you to control both, but they had different capabilities. And if the dagger would be useless to the Prince now, the locket seems to have just served him well.

The Ghost, for the umpteenth time, noted the Prince's amazing ability to resist the Sands. And it, however paradoxical it may sound, intensified in their presence. It is not known whether he would have mastered the secrets of the medallion and dagger if nothing had happened in Azad, and here, on the Island, he would not have been put in an absolutely hopeless and hopeless situation. It turned out that he was able not only to resist their influence, but even to some extent to control them, subjugating them to himself, even to a small extent. Maybe he inherited something from his mother? The ghost even found it difficult to answer what protected the Prince more from the Sands when he discovered them in Azad - this skill or the fact that he had a dagger in his hands. But too much confidence would be fatal to the Prince. Fortunately, he did not have this confidence, he acted more intuitively than fully meaningfully.

Throwing Kaileena away once more, the Prince said to her as she stood up:

"What if the timeline is wrong?" And I wasn't really going to kill you?

"The timeline is never wrong!" It is absolute! Kaileena said angrily in response.

The ghost saw that she was speaking sincerely. She is completely confident in her rightness and in her convictions. Each time her gaze betrayed her true thoughts, but the Prince did not know how to read it well enough. The ghost saw all the shades of her mood, heard every breath and the smallest movements of her eyes. But what was it that drove her then?

"But then how do you explain my presence?" After all, you clearly did not expect him! The Prince objected to her.

"Oh, that just confirms everything I've been talking about. I was only foolish enough to believe that I would be able to avoid this meeting! Kaileena replied triumphantly. However, even the Prince could see the despair in her eyes. Fleeting, but incredibly deep. And at that moment, he felt that he understood her like no one else. They were kindred spirits, haunted by the same scourge, albeit in different forms. It seemed to him that he should help her rather than kill her. But she resisted this in every possible way and seemed to deliberately run to her death. And what if this is also one of the tricks? To evoke compassion and take advantage of it? She had already succeeded in this more than once.

But the Ghost, who had also seen that look and knew a little more than the Prince, had no doubt about her feelings at that moment. Kaileena's despair was real, she had long been tormented

by the evil fate hanging over her, unable to influence the outcome of these days. And the more actively she tried to influence the timeline, the more swiftly and mercilessly she walked towards this fateful moment.

The prince hesitated. Perhaps Kaileena could tell him something about the mysteries of fate and the timeline. Perhaps they would even find some way out of the situation together. But on the other hand, his main plan was incredibly simple and tempting – to kill the Empress before she created the Sands and put an end to this story once and for all. And it promised much more obvious success. And, not wanting to repeat previous mistakes, he decided to stick to it.

At the same moment, Kailina again went on the offensive. And the Prince noticed the strangeness in her movements again. This time, they weren't too fast, he could easily block her punches. But she moved in such a way that he could not strike her a decisive blow. Every step she took, every swing of her swords, when she defended herself, was somehow incredibly lucky. It was as if she knew where each of the Prince's next blows would be directed.

Caileena, sensing the Prince's change in mood, resorted to a tactic that had already been worked out: she looked into the future, dividing her consciousness into two parts and thus avoiding the most unfortunate versions of this future. This required incredible effort from her, because the battle was taking place here and now, and she had to instantly react both to what was happening and to signals from the second part of her consciousness, from the near future.

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Kaileena's skill was not a gift or an accident. By studying the relics of the Sands of Time and reading ancient books (and, of course, Namtar's journal), she, as the last Guardian, was the first to have questions and doubts. And at first, they led her to the idea that she should not only blindly follow rituals, but could try to develop ideas from books and become even more powerful. She looked at the process of splitting the dagger in her own way and decided to repeat the same thing on a living person. On yourself. But after much research, she came to the conclusion that in the case of humans, it was not the physical shell that was divided, but the consciousness. And soon she felt the benefits of this idea when implemented. Kaileena was the first to continue to build on Namtar's achievements, though she didn't fully realize it. She was more fascinated by the process itself - the new skill gave her incredible power. She found it especially interesting after various experiments on other living beings that did not bring the desired result. She could only give birth to new monsters, in the most incredible guises, but, nevertheless, so

identical and it once incredibly bored her. Her life almost turned into a dreary anticipation of the very hour when the Sands of Time would be created and the mission entrusted to her would be completed.

In fact, at the time of the creation of the Sands of Time, Kaileena was only slightly older than the Prince, but absorbing the Sands and their knowledge, including the knowledge of previous generations, coupled with the skill of splitting consciousness, helped her live as if several lives at once. And the more she valued her own. But did the Sands need it?

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Kaileen was in for another defeat, and the Prince was well aware that there was a simple, or at least rational, explanation for each of her tricks. He felt that this time she was not reading his mind, afraid of being vulnerable. She somehow sees the timeline and just follows it. But, apparently, it does it in very short fragments, short-sightedly, following only a momentary goal - to survive.

The prince, moreover, had time to realize that this enemy was best fought with his own weapons. And he hurried to use the locket, his most unusual ability, which he did not even really understand. But if it helped him survive the same trip to the Clockwork Tower twice, then he should also work in the opposite direction: run into the future for a while, and not relive the past. And, without knowing it, the Prince practically repeated Kaileena's trick, in fact again tipping the scales to his side. He was able to see events in advance. He did it not so confidently, the world around him blurred in a foggy haze, sometimes losing its clear outlines and as if splitting, but still it gave him at least something.

Suddenly stopping the attacks, Kaileena, realizing the futility of her next idea, blurted out.

"Who are you?"

Not quite understanding her question, the Prince replied:

"A man who is afraid of death, just like you.

Kaileena's gaze darted frightenedly from the Prince to something invisible behind him. The prince did not pay attention to this, writing it off as another attempt to confuse him. He raised his sword above his head and was the first to charge, taking advantage of the confusion of the enemy, but being ready to fight back. At this moment, the Empress's eyes flashed with yellow light, she spread her arms to the sides and threw her swords, and her body slightly lifted and hung in the air. Then, she put the fist of one hand into the palm of the other, bringing them to her chin and bowing her head slightly. A small sand vortex began to rotate around it. And suddenly, the blow of the Prince, who had not yet had time to approach Kaileena, was

blocked by a creature who appeared out of nowhere. A sand monster the likes of which the Prince had met only twice, on the bridge at the Watchtower and in the Garden. But, this time, it was not a vision. And it turned out that there were two such creatures. Each of them held one of the Empress's swords in their hands, and their eyes burned with the same yellow light. They were entirely the spawn of the Sands.

The monsters were dressed in red robes, their torsos were exposed, and their shoulders, chest, and arms were protected by metal armor. It is difficult to say whether they were ever people and if so, whether they were women or men. Most likely, these creatures are just another creation of the Empress, created in her countless experiments, to desecrate life. But their power was great, and Kaileena must have created them for her own protection. However, this meant only one thing: she resorted to extreme measures, and, therefore, the Prince was close to victory.

But he still needed to defeat the Empress's bodyguards. They moved in a very unusual way, as if floating in the air. At the same time, their movements were confident and powerful, as if they were firmly on their feet. It was also unknown whether they were controlled by the Empress or acted on their own, but, in any case, they represented a very serious opponent. During the fight, they were constantly next to each other, and it was very difficult for the Prince to keep both of them in sight.

Finally, the Prince managed to defeat one of them. And then he did not hesitate to set to work on the second monster. But suddenly, a second before victory, he heard a strange sound behind him, turning to see the monster grow out of the sand vortex again and attack the Prince again. And so it was repeated several times - the Prince's swords were unable to defeat these creatures. Apparently, Kaileena brought them back to life time after time and threw them into battle again. Then the Prince pretended to lose the fight and the monsters gradually pushed him to the entrance to the throne room. Descending the stairs and taking advantage of Kaileena's inability to see him, he grabbed a dagger and ended the pretense by plunging the dagger into one of the monsters. The Prince didn't have time to enjoy the half-forgotten feeling of wielding a dagger. Instead, he focused on the connection between the two that had worked in the past. And the dagger obediently absorbed the Sand from both of the Empress's bodyguards. After that, she could not resurrect them again, and now she was face to face with her enemy. It seems that that incident in Azad was only a preparation for the most important battle in the life of the Prince.

Clutching his dagger, he ran up the stairs, about to deliver a decisive blow. Kaileena saw him and instantly understood what had

happened. The glow from her eyes was almost gone. Gathering the last of her strength, she put her hands forward, sending a sand whirlwind at the Prince, which knocked him off his feet and threw him aside. He dropped his dagger and nearly fainted. Standing up with difficulty, the Prince saw Kaileena pick up the dagger and run in the direction of the Hourglass. He was surprised that she didn't try to finish him off, but suddenly realized that this was her last desperate attempt to create the Sands of Time.

Kaileena stopped at the counter where the dagger usually lay. In her eyes, the Ghost read genuine fear. She realized that she had been doomed from the start, and only wanted to hide the dagger from a dangerous enemy who turned out to have a wealth of knowledge about the Sands. In a fight with such an opponent, she had no chance, unless she deprived him of the dagger. But her attempt was more of an act of desperation.

"Did *he* really tell him something? Was the Prince able to get him to talk? Did he succeed in what the entire Guardian Line had failed to do for a thousand years? Or worse, what if the Prince freed *him*?"

"I'm sorry, Kaileena. But I can't let that happen! The Prince said, piercing the Empress with his sword from behind.

"Fool...," she wheezed, and trying to say something else, she collapsed dead. This time for real.

"You should have made a different decision," the Prince said regretfully. He still did not want her to die, despite all her efforts.

A few moments later, a whirlwind swirled around the body of the defeated Empress again, and her skin was covered with a golden glow. It quickly spread throughout the body and every second intensified, absorbing it. The sands took her flesh back.

"Who was she?" the Prince asked himself.

Suddenly, when the glow became unbearably bright, there was something like an explosion, a strong burst of Sands, which stunned the Prince and threw him into the far corner of the hall. When he came to his senses, he remembered that something similar had happened after the victory over Shadi, and he did not pay attention to it, although the feeling of anxiety did not leave him. He wanted to leave this place as soon as possible, it drove him crazy, and the Sand swirling around him did not even think of dissipating - it seemed to want to devour him himself.

The prince only approached the dagger for the last time, but he was disappointed - it was unreachable again. Her last illusion.

"Well, then, at least, Maharaja will not be able to take possession of it when he arrives here in hundreds of years," thought the Prince.

He opened the giant doors from the inside and found himself in the Central Hall. On the way back to the Watchtower, it seemed to the Prince that the whole fortress was shaking, as if grieving for his mistress. The hum sometimes turned into a moan, but the Prince only grinned and walked on.

"Let this place perish and go under water. And I'll be far away from here soon! He said aloud and stepped into the time portal for the last time.

The sand whirlwind had already habitually picked up his body and carried him through time, to where the Prince was finally going to enjoy peace, for the first time in many years.

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The meeting of the Maharaja and the Empress was no longer destined to take place. However, the Ghost was still able to see this other version of events that had taken place before the Prince's intervention. In it, Kaileena was significantly more powerful, possessing the power of the real Sands of Time, rather than being a vulnerable Guardian. But even she found it difficult to hold back the onslaught of the huge army of Maharajah, who had been besieging the central part of the fortress for several days. Even though Kaileena fully recovered from the creation of the Sands, in the end, her vast army was completely wiped out, and the doors to the throne room fell under the onslaught of the guns.

Kaileena offered her life in exchange for secret knowledge, which only she could do, and was ready to surrender, but was killed by one of Maharajah's allies. By that time, Amar had already managed to find Namtar's diary in the library and read it to the end. And, thanks to this book, he knew all the secrets of the Island and began his hunt for the dagger, which, however, was never crowned with success.

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Returning to the present, the Prince found another way out of the fortress. He still had to find a ship or some small vessel that could get him to Babylon. The thought returned to him that the entire team must have died and no one was waiting for him to go back. This somewhat overshadowed his joy at victory. But, despite everything, despite all the warnings and dangers, he deceived fate, changing the course of events, and got rid of the chase once and for all.

Now he was standing on the edge of a high cliff and looking into the distance, thinking about home. But this place did not let him go just like that, and his thoughts involuntarily returned to the events

that had happened. The Prince was surprised at how easy it was for him to defeat the Empress - she turned out to be a rather weak enemy, whose strength lay only in skillful deception and subtle manipulation. As soon as this was discovered, she was practically defenseless. But, perhaps, this victory still cannot be called easy - their confrontation lasted for many hours, just until the last moment he did not know his enemy by sight. And it took him great effort to get out of the web of lies of the Empress, sometimes only thanks to luck or intuition. All this was anything but a simple task. And their open battle is only a natural result of all events. I wonder what she wanted to tell him just before she died? Fate, obviously, has a good sense of humor, since it forced the Prince to kill a man without real need. He hastened to dismiss further regrets, thinking that Kaileena had made the mistake herself, turning out to be a blind fanatic. Her status as Empress did not make her wise and far-sighted. He lived with this burden for years and learned to distinguish truth from fiction.

The prince suddenly thought that his accidental idea of throwing away the locket when he went back in time and relived the journey to the Clockwork Tower was the best thing he could make. Not even because Kaileena had used the locket against him, but because he didn't know how to use it properly. And by remaining in this alternate version of reality, he would have been able to achieve his goal of defeating the Empress, but he would never have been able to return to the future he left off and continue it from the same point where he left off. The new and old lines would not intersect. In itself, this is not terrible, but the problem would be different: he would become dependent on the medallion without knowing it. Sooner or later, the Prince would have let him out of his hands, and something terrible would have happened: he would have returned to his starting point in the Garden. And the nightmare would continue. The journey of his consciousness into the past resembled an attempt to escape from a bubble that only stretches endlessly, but does not allow him to get out, creating an imaginary reality.

And now it's time for the last decisive step: to finally get rid of the medallion. A little risky – what if he's still in this bubble? But now he did not need it at all, and in order to calm down completely, the Prince was going to throw away the locket and breathe easy. He was sure that he had done everything right and would not go back in time to his imprisonment in the Garden. After all, it seems that he took it off for a while during the battle with Kaileena? The prince reached for the locket that had been hidden behind his chest armor all this time, about to throw it off the cliff.

A piercing, cold wind blew from somewhere below. Perhaps even too cold. And yet it was almost silent. The waves below beat

against the rocks, but the cliff was so high that the Prince could hardly hear their roar. He looked down, and it seemed to him that the coastal stones were moving further away with every second, the cliff seemed to stretch out and the Prince stood alone on the top, amidst the enveloping cold, which climbed under his clothes and pinched his skin. Perhaps even too persistently. Perhaps it wasn't the wind at all, but... In an instant, the Prince's face changed from calm and haughty to anxious.

– How is this even possible? He said, or rather shouted aloud.

He was used to putting up with the challenges of fate, but this time all reasonable explanations for Dahaki's heavy footsteps in the vicinity were over. Death continued to follow him, no matter what.

Chapter 22. Ghost

What an evil the Sands can be in the wrong hands! He literally uses them as a weapon, despite the fact that I only taught him to create and evolve. So I was so blinded by my father's love and joy at his return that I did not see any terrible omens in the fog of Fate. Now I feel that the Sands are changing, something is happening to them. to look for answers and read the line of Fate. It is as if they stop listening to me - Nergal's side gets the better of them. I missed the moment when it started. It means that I really have no choice - either me or him. ***I have no other enemies, and I will be able to thoroughly prepare for this fight.***

I will have to act in his own way - I will use the Sands as a weapon. But I will not create monsters and go against nature. I will develop my idea of creating a huge Hourglass, which will give me a special power - it will make me the master of the Sands. The clock will absorb almost all the power of the Abyss, weakening Nergal's army and depriving him of control over the Sands - there will be almost no of them left. This would be the wrong step if it were not for the circumstances - Dilmun may lose everything and never become what he was. But sometimes losing everything is the only way to gain something. My decision may turn out to be a salvation. And I have to start as soon as possible. Time, which was my best ally, is now my enemy, breathing down my neck. It seems to me that the count has already gone to weeks - in just a month it will be clear who is the winner and who is the loser.

Such a concentration of the Sands in one place will inevitably create a special zone around the Clock. I can use it as a trap – time will seem to stop in it, but I can't leave it without outside help. I am not ready to kill my own son, although I do not believe that he will ever be able to become the same. By leaving him in captivity, I will be able to turn back the clock without it touching him—he will remain trapped, in "eternal prison"—but it will help Dilmun to return to his former self, at least partially. And the Clock itself will be an excellent bait; When I finish them, they will be sent straight to the throne room.

The clock will be set up in such a way that it will be possible to open it, releasing the Sand, and close it again so that it absorbs it back. To do this, I will install two locking mechanisms on them - on the isthmus and on the top cover. However, they can only be used with a special key-dagger. I came up with it, looking back at the medallion - I gave it almost the same properties, but its main difference is that it is also a weapon. And not only cold, but the dagger can take me back in time for a few moments, giving me an advantage in battle. And only the powerful Hourglass listens to him -

Nergal simply cannot do anything with them, and by the time he realizes that this is a trap, it will be too late. And even if he gets the dagger, he won't figure out how to control the power of the Clock with it, doing a useless study of mechanisms. Meanwhile, everything is very simple – the small governs the large, if the big imbues the small with its power. But he is too blind to see the little things.

Namtar's Diary, Entry 71

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He remembered his birth. The fog of fading reality, the emptiness around him, and only some invisible force pulls him away, somewhere into the unknown. But he found the strength to fight it, to resist it. What for? He himself did not know for sure, as well as did not understand whether he needed to fight at all. But he felt that he had some unfinished business left, and he wanted to take advantage of the opportunity given to him. Even if it changed his entire life, he was willing to take the risk. It seemed to him that he was going against the current, against the established order of things. One against the whole world. A world of which he was no longer a part.

Who was he? And, most importantly, who did he become? For the first moments, he did not understand anything, and the world around him seemed to go crazy: now it blurred, turning into shapeless spots, then vice versa, as if it was reassembling into a single picture of a place familiar to him. At the same time, time, too, did not flow at the usual pace, but jumped back and forth, turning everything around into ruins and returning to the original majestic state.

In the same fragments, the memory returned to the Ghost. He reconstructed events by asking questions. Did he really win, defeated him? The confrontation that had dragged on for so long had finally ended, but the circumstances were not on his side? His feelings had turned into something else, but they still resembled human ones. He was confused and did not know what he should be feeling now. Repentance? Anger? Or a peace fueled by a sense of liberation from everything that tormented him and moved him at the same time? But he did not want this freedom, even if it lay at his feet for an eternity.

He said to himself: "I am not defeated, I will continue to fight!"

By an incomprehensible coincidence, eternity began here, in the Central Hall of Dilmun Fortress, on the island of Saggig. A strange, magical place where all paths converge, destinies intertwine. This is where everything begins and ends. One step away from the damned Hourglass that seemed to have captured him. And now, when he was finally freed from this imprisonment, he was not happy about it and

longed to return back to his prison. He wanted to fix everything, he wanted to turn back time and see among the thousands and thousands of moments when something went wrong. But even though he was still in the middle of things, he had no idea where to start or if it would make any difference. Hadn't he already done everything he could?

And then, as if in answer to his questions, the Ghost discovered her. She greeted him happily, she waited so much... She searched for so long, wandering in the void. He felt that now he was not alone, a faithful friend was next to him. A white dog named Jatta is a ghost like himself. And the rage that overwhelmed and literally suffocated him receded. Along with powerlessness, which inflamed this anger even more. And after a moment, he felt that Jatta was calling him somewhere, yes, exactly as if she could really speak and think. But this call had no voice. It could be read in her incredibly meaningful gaze, heard by the Ghost in his mind. He could answer her as if they were communicating. And we talked for a very long time. It surprised him – maybe he had missed or forgotten something? I wonder how much time has passed since he...? And why did it suddenly cease, as if the wind over the boundless sea had suddenly ceased and no longer raised waves?

But he didn't have time to think. Jatta was pulling him somewhere, calling him, dragging him with her. At another time and place, away from the Island. Here he had already done everything he could, or rather, tried. He was looking for a different future, but it was closed to him. The ancient plan of fate was carried out against his will. Although, in a sense, he himself was the one who laid the first brick in the foundation of this plan. And he was no longer able to fight the causes - he could only fight the consequences. Maybe he will somehow be able to make up for his immense guilt before this world.

The ghost followed Jatta, who led him to Azad, at the very moment the Prince opened the Sands of Time. She was looking for something in this place, at that very time. Or someone. But she would not have coped alone, she did not understand many things, and the Ghost also regarded this as an opportunity to know her nature, but at the same time not to completely lose touch with the real world. In addition, Jatta showed him a new path - he stepped on the path of compassion and mutual assistance. He learned what friendship is and what hope is. And again I saw the inexorability of fate. So clearly and distinctly that he wanted to argue with her one last time, which made him succumb to a fleeting impulsive desire. And hope collapsed again.

Then he learned patience. He chose the Prince for his observations, and for years he followed him, in every journey, in every step, gliding behind him like a silent shadow, protecting and

guiding him. The ghost even managed to become attached to the Prince. He saw this as his destiny – to be a patient observer, to learn about this new world for him and to look for at least one more, the tiniest chance to get through to reality. In Azad, Ghost and Jatta did everything they could, but it hardly changed anything. It meant that the time had not yet come, or he himself was not yet ready. And now Jatta followed him on the path of knowledge and wisdom.

Any roads were open to them. Even time itself parted before them – after all, they simply did not exist in it. But the Ghost could still sense its flow and could observe it from anywhere, moving in it at will, at any speed, and in any direction. He felt himself as a pure consciousness, free from bodily fetters, all kinds of needs and torments. But it depended only on him what form this consciousness would take. His mind had new powers, but the Ghost had yet to discover them. And, over time, he began to observe the real world mainly only in order to get to know himself better, as the complete opposite of man. He had to stop being just a reflection in a mirror, and act and think according to his own will, according to his nature. And so all immediacy disappeared from his life – his decisions did not depend on time. They were determined by the depth of his thoughts – now he could afford such a luxury. In addition, he lost the meaning of the concept of "memories". For him, "before" and "after" were not so important - all events merged into a single closed line, which was always in front of him, as in the palm of his hand. Even those that have never happened at all. The timelines in which they occurred were rewritten, canceled, and no one remembered them, except for the Ghost and the rare lucky ones who would be more likely to be taken for madmen if they told anyone about it. Because, in the end, there was only one line. And if someone changed it, then the new one became the real and only one. Others lived only in rare fading memories, and the real timeline always, like a shot arrow, flew smoothly, without deviation. It did not look like a branching tree, as many people thought.

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Everywhere the Ghost was followed by a faithful friend. They understood each other like no one else. For the interaction of their consciousnesses, the Sands were not needed – they were only a material convention. As well as the very concept of friendship, but the Ghost was not yet ready to give it up. And it is unlikely that there will ever be. In addition, Jatta was also a guide for him between the past, which he already felt alien and distant, and the future, which was alien and incomprehensible. She was his real, if that made sense at all, his inner voice, his guiding light in this new world. The paths

that Jatta had walked instantly became known to him, allowing him to put the whole picture together. It was the answers to questions he wouldn't have thought to ask. Jatta was his luck, his hope, and her look seemed to change him. Perhaps she knew better than he himself what he should be. And even who he was.

She also showed him for the first time how to pacify Dahaka by possessing his body for a while. The world through the eyes of the monster looked very strange and unusual. The ghost felt, in addition to the great power of the beast, its extraordinary abilities, with the help of which it could see lines running smoothly in the flow of time. Without intertwining and contradictions, at least until there was an intruder, like the Prince. And it was his life that he saved, using Jatta's hint. The ghost simply would not have come up with such an idea, he was not yet ready to argue with the very essence of things. Although it seemed to him that there was some much simpler explanation for all this. And he vaguely guessed what it was, but he did not yet dare to believe in it, and so the solution to this riddle seemed to him hidden in the fog. As if someone did not want the truth to ever be revealed at all.

Jatta saved him from loneliness. It was not human, but the immensity of the emptiness around him was too striking to his imagination. He faced it one-on-one, an immense obstacle even for his new consciousness with extraordinary capabilities. But now the emptiness receded, as if changing. What if he could change it at will?

The ghost understood that he was something that should not exist at all. He existed in defiance of all the laws of nature. But as soon as he met Jatta, he realized that there must be a certain pattern of the appearance of people like them. She proved that he was not an exception, not an anomaly. And, therefore, he is not alone.

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Ever since the Ghost and the Prince had returned to the Island, he had discovered even more abilities and was excited to explore new things. He discovered the ability to concentrate all his feelings, impressions, and what he used to call memories into one infinitesimal point in time, making his mind extremely sensitive and achieving enlightenment. At such moments, he realized that even his new consciousness was not able to easily cope with such a huge influx of feelings and knowledge. And this made him a little closer to people for a short time. Sometimes he was literally seized by a daze, it seemed to him that he saw through the whole world, heard its measured breathing, and saw every moment, from birth to death. And there was no point in taking a single step or doing anything: this world had already decided what would happen to him at each of the

moments of his past and future. But time after time, the Ghost found the strength to come to his senses, slightly loosening his grip to open up new boundaries that stretched far beyond the ordinary material world. He felt the need to constantly change. After all, memories compressed into one point were not so terrible as they were stretched into infinity. A monotonous and everywhere the same eternity would definitely not suit him. The whole meaning of existence for him was in movement. After all, he would never grow old or die, which meant that he had to know infinity, even if sometimes it frightened him and he was afraid of getting lost in it. Once he tried to read all the fates of people at once and pull all their experiences and thoughts into his consciousness. It was an invaluable experience, but mainly because he decided not to repeat such an experiment. He ceased to feel himself as a certain person and turned into some kind of element that was omnipresent. He lost all reference points and desires, heard millions of voices, but did not make out a single one in particular, turning into a deity whose only purpose was to hold the whole world in his palm, not caring about details. But human categories did not suit him at all, only growing up and learning wisdom led him to a dead end, turning him into a stone and depriving him of an incentive to move on. After all, in the infinite and boundless world, absolutely everything was possible. And, at the same time, absolutely everything was equally unimportant, insignificant. On the other hand, no matter how much he wanders about it, he will never reach the edge and get to know it completely. His journey had a starting point, it was like a ray of light in the darkness. In endless darkness, no matter which direction you go. After all, the starting point did not mean anything, it was not the center. She only divided everything into two parts, the size of which was also infinite. The ray, on the other hand, is limited on one side by the starting point, which means that it will never comprehend this world in its entirety. This means that his future will depend on what path he will take, in what sequence he will pass these thousands and thousands of roads (although there will be millions more after them). What his consciousness will become.

Jatta was the second ray in this darkness. And they could cross its blind infinity twice as fast if they moved in different directions, moving further and further away from each other. And the choice was up to the Ghost – to cover as much as possible or to choose one direction, but making this beam twice as bright, stronger? Studying eternity not in depth, but in breadth.

The ghost gradually realized that there were no boundaries of consciousness either. He could endlessly create no matter how complex thoughtforms, the most incredible ideas – this is another manifestation of the immensity of the world. Innumerable insights

and somersaults of consciousness, of which an ordinary, mortal man is incapable, promised only one thing: he would never get bored, the world would never cease to amaze him, if he did not stand still for a long time. The only thing that worried him was that he would not want to get lost and lose himself. If he becomes indifferent to everything, he will seek only instant entertainment. The journey through eternity required him to maintain a certain balance – he should not just pass through everything through his consciousness. But there was no point in absorbing everything either. A balance was needed between change and memory, current knowledge. And his friendship with Jatta helped him a lot in this.

But sometimes the Ghost wanted to return to simpler, more mundane things. First, he felt that he was not yet ready for his journey. And secondly, he knew that when the time came and he went into the unknown, he was unlikely to come back. And on one of these returns, he found Iman, who, in his religious enlightenment, was able to see and hear the Ghost – a rare stroke of luck that was possible (although, alas, it did not last long) only in the vicinity of the Sands. They did not affect the Ghost in any way, but opened the inner gaze of an ordinary person who wanted to see something more and was ready for it, looking for this meeting. The ghost knew that the Prince was not destined to escape death, regardless of whether he interfered in his fate by holding Dahaku back or not. The prince did not need this help. But the Ghost felt that he could help someone else, someone who was really in need and was not doomed - the people from the Prince's team. They were victims of circumstances: the Prince deceived them, pursuing only his own goals. And this deception turned them away from him, but they were almost powerless against all the horrors of the Island and would surely have died if the Ghost had not intervened in time. He led them along a safe path, using all his knowledge and skills. And, quite by chance, something caught his attention that surprised him immensely. He realized for the first time how confusing a timeline can be, and how unobviously completely disconnected events can be. But in addition to the new knowledge, the Ghost saw a new opportunity in this: to help the one before whom he felt guilty. It was a pity that he could not have done it earlier.

Having prepared everything, with the help of Iman, the Ghost returned to the Prince. He could not and was no longer going to help him in the fight against his fate - he was doomed. And yet, the Prince defied fate, not going to give up until the very last second. The ghost saw something special in him, considered him a kind of savior, someone worthy, who, at the same time, needed help himself. Or in repentance, which will come to him not a moment before death, but while still alive. The Ghost believed that with his help, he would be

able to find something special or somehow use the Prince to take the banner from him and continue the fight against the Sands. From the very moment he left her, succumbing to his own weakness. This victory would make him ready for a new journey, without return and unnecessary regrets.

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Unlike the Prince, the Ghost understood the language in Namtar's diary from the very beginning and was well aware of his deeds. About his searches and discoveries, deep knowledge and equally incredible delusions. Every letter seemed familiar to him, and the Ghost knew from the slightest irregularities in his handwriting what Namtar was feeling. He saw all this with his own eyes and remembered it perfectly, as if he himself wrote these lines three thousand years ago. What is ghost time? Everything he knew was happening now, not in the past. It is as if he is right at this moment in an ancient fortress and realizes the horrors of his mistakes and the incredible cunning and cruelty of Nergal. What could he oppose to him? Both of them are not at all what they once were. They are only an echo in eternity, which is alive only in their deeds. In their legacy.

The ghost was amazed at Namtar's ability to hide anything, things or clues, and leave them in plain sight. That in itself was a hint of something more. He knew that his secrets would be revealed sooner or later. But what if he had counted on it? What if there were other hiding places hidden for real? It was impossible to detect them without knowing about them. Only vague guesses must have tormented the Keepers all this time, but they were unable to do anything about it. Too much must be sacrificed for the sake of being able to possess this secret. So much so that even the Ghost did not realize the scale of his find at first. After all, it is not enough just to parse words - you need to be able to read between the lines. He found a point, a knot, into which each of the many lines was woven. But, even after receiving some answers, he left a message that was supposed to set off a chain of events that were quite real. They would have been the help that he wished to give to the one to whom he felt guilty. For the first time in a long time, the ghost saw a real, albeit negligible, opportunity to save his life.

Having done everything in his power and in his power, the Ghost was going to continue his search. He made a choice, and he could only observe, because he could no longer influence anything, so now he wanted to find something for himself. The answer that perhaps even eternity could not give him. Or it will take forever to find it yourself. There was another corner he hadn't looked into before, a secret, hidden memory of events that had taken place a couple of

thousand years before Namtar. In their struggle, they were very similar to the Ghost. They searched where no one would have thought to look. They knew things that no one else knew. Therefore, the Ghost considered it his duty to continue the path he had once begun. The one that has almost faded away and lost in time, turning into a disembodied echo of the past, devoid of voice and strength. But it is not the form that is important, but the goal itself, the aspiration. And the Ghost decided to do what he usually avoided in every possible way - to repeat the past, immersing himself in the memory and dissolving in it. It is this transformation that should change him forever, allowing him to leave his own life in the past, but at the same time taking all the most important things from it and continuing the confrontation with the Sands. And Jatta would help in this fight again. But the Ghost had to face the memory alone. After all, first, before destroying anything, he must learn to create. This is what will really help him to find and know himself! It is too early for him to embark on a journey through infinity. And why go anywhere at all, if the mystery of creation made it possible to give birth to anything here and now? And then infinity itself will come to him, pass through him and nourish him with its wisdom.

Chapter 23. Captive

Of the two of us, he is the only one who has doubts. Nergal is confidently moving towards his goal, which is not entirely clear to me, and does not think of turning away from the intended path. He is ready to literally go over his head. And I wouldn't kill him even if I wanted to, because without his knowledge, it would be very difficult for me to return everything to its original form. Unfortunately, the creation of the Hourglass is not going as fast as we would like. It seems that I have turned into a catch-up.

His atrocities have reached the outer part of the Island - people have begun to disappear, mothers do not recognize their sons, who are allegedly recruited to protect the Island from some terrible enemy. But they have no other enemy but Nergal! People complain about the new order, and I can't even do anything - they cut off my way there! And another big problem for me: Nergal seems to be acting on my behalf, destroying everything that I have been striving for and for which I have been working for so long. People want someone who can be blamed for all their troubles, and I have never even deigned to appear before them. Therefore, even if I could escape, it would be dangerous for me to appear there.

I decided to send Jatta to the outer island. It will be my eyes and ears. And to make that bond really strong, I put a locket on her collar. With the dagger, I won't lose anything, but I will be able to keep a close eye on what is happening outside of Dilmun. Although, it seems that I am the only one who uses this name now. According to rumors, people remembered the ancient names - Osakar for the outer part of the Island in the shape of a crescent moon and Saggig for the central part, where the fortress stands. Now they consider it a source of evil, so the name "black head" has a clearly negative connotation. Dilmun is spoken of only in the past tense, so calling the Island before the flood.

Jatta will swim across the strait under the cover of night, and then wander around the now only settlement, trying to avoid the enemy - she does it perfectly. I can only watch in order to at least remain aware of Nergal's plans and be ready for any of his sudden actions. And my powerlessness weighs terribly on me - I am deprived of the opportunity to help people, my people. I am deprived of my honest name. I can only trust my desperate hope, that leads me through the labyrinths of insidious Fate and tosses me from wave to wave in the ocean of time, and continue to create the Clock and the Eternal Prison. ***But maybe I am worthy of her like no one else?***

Namtar's Journal, Entry 75

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The prince was saved in a matter of seconds - the metal grate behind him stopped the beast for a moment. But only for a moment - Dahaka was still implacable, the air around the Prince breathed his cold rage and, digging into his throat, pulled him into the abyss, preventing him from running, confusing thoughts and blurring images before his eyes. At one point, so many questions arose in his head that it seemed as if it was about to burst. Heavy thoughts slowed him down, wounded him, and the Prince fled, not caring about the road. His legs carried him along the ledge, which narrowed more and more under the pressure of one of the walls of the fortress. What is this, another mockery of fate?

At some point, the Prince could no longer escape. Pressing against the wall and spreading his arms, he continued to walk hastily along the narrow ledge. He was at a safe enough distance from Dahaki and his tentacles could not reach the Prince and grab him, and the beast itself was unable to follow the same path. Then, letting out a menacing roar, he slammed his powerful fists against the wall and stepped into the resulting hole, disappearing from sight. It took the prince literally a second to understand the monster's plan: it was going to catch up with him from the inside and throw him off the cliff onto the sharp rocks below. Although, judging by his persistence, he will not rely on chance and will bring the matter to an end, capturing the Prince and finishing him off himself. It will consume it as a mistake of time, a foreign body that shouldn't have been there at all.

And yet the time was hard and clumsy, since it could be deceived at least for a short time. It strove for integrity and straightforward certainty, but the game that the Prince unwittingly started with it was favorable to both, making them pieces of equal strength, throwing both equally useful advantages. It seemed that the goal of this game was a delicate balance on the verge of the Prince's despair, who sought to continue this game indefinitely. And time after time, in the prison that time had built for him, the Prince found a flaw, some kind of hole through which, even at the very last moment, he escaped from the captivity of the shrinking bars of his cage. Already ready to fall down (just to avoid falling into the clutches of Dahake!), the Prince suddenly saw a rift in the wall below him, which led into the inside of the fortress, but into a room or hall that was lower than the one in which the beast was now. Surely this breach was formed from the old age of the wall, from the fact that time stumbled again, making the wrong move against the Prince and giving him a short-term advantage.

He hung on his arms from the ledge and jumped into the unknown - a dark hole hid the height of the room behind the wall,

and the bricks along its edges could collapse, collapsing on the Prince or preventing him from holding on to the edge of the rift at all. However, the wall that went down was slightly sloping and protruded forward, allowing the Prince not to commit obvious suicide, but at least try his luck. And before he even had time to land, he heard the crash of a collapsed wall and piles of stones flying in different directions from above. The Prince's expectations were confirmed, but he was already one step ahead. But only while he was running. And what will happen when he runs out of steam and can no longer hide from the beast? When all his strength runs out, the tricks run out and luck in this crazy game will not be on his side? The answer was quite obvious. After all, as soon as he stopped and convinced himself for a second of a pleasant lie after defeating Kaileena, the whole world immediately collapsed, without explanation and without any warning. Again.

Upon landing, the Prince, struggling to orient himself in the semi-darkness, stumbling, falling, rising again and rushing forward, ran away from this place, hearing an enraged beast behind him, crushing stones, descend and rush after him.

As the Prince's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he found himself in a long and multi-tiered room consisting of several halls, separated by once strong massive doors. In the halls, many passages and stairs were arranged, and the tiers were supported by rare large columns and many smaller ones in girth. The prince ran along the rotten bars and collapsed doors - this place was once a prison. He heard Dahaka walking heavily somewhere behind, not far away. There was no way he was going to stop or stop the chase. The prince noticed that the beast practically did not run, but this did not make it easier to hide from him. Several times the Prince descended to the lower tiers in the hope of hiding and waiting it out, but each time he heard these menacing steps and realized that he was in trouble. A second of delay and this prison would become his own grave.

Running from one end to the other, the Prince saw that it ended with a single door on the lowest level and hurried there, hoping to get out of such a limited space and finally break away from the pursuit. The chase was incredibly tiring for him: he ran, constantly clinging to the bumps in the floor, falling somewhere, and peering into the darkness with all his might. Now it wasn't just catching up with him, it was already everywhere. In addition, his movements were fettered by fear and despair. What went wrong? Why is Dahaka still chasing him?

Running through the giant metal door that hung over the exit, the Prince found himself in a hall with a high ceiling. There was a grate on it, through which a dim light penetrated. There was nothing remarkable in the hall, except that it was not an exit at all - there was

another cell, the door to which was open. But how could one escape from such a place?

Meanwhile, the Prince heard heavy footsteps nearby again. He's trapped himself! He has nowhere else to run! He could not lock himself in the cell - such a grate would not stop the animal for a second. The hall itself was very small, and at any point in it, Dahaka could easily reach the Prince with his tentacles. And the sheer walls left no chance to climb up - although it would not help, because apart from the bars on the ceiling, the Prince had no options to escape. And then he made the only possible decision: he went back and, facing the beast almost face to face, cut the thick channel that held the massive door and retreated inside, agreeing to voluntary imprisonment. Here, behind this door, Dahaka would not be able to reach him - the door was extremely heavy and made of metal - even such a creature would not be able to do it. The walls surrounding the hall turned out to be incredibly thick. In just a moment, several dull knocks were heard on the door and on the wall. Centuries-old dust fell from the ancient bricks, but it withstood the onslaught. A dull menacing growl was heard from behind the door, and in a moment everything was quiet. Now the Prince will have enough time to think about everything in peace and quiet. Perhaps this was the only way out of this whole story: the Prince could only remain safe from Dahaki in confinement. However, sooner or later he will die of thirst or hunger. It seems that the guardian of fate won anyway. The Prince only had time to realize his mistakes and come to terms with them. And then, perhaps, he will decide to take the last desperate step and end his life without waiting for a painful death.

Breathing heavily, he sat down on a small raised platform in the center of the hall and buried his face in his wedge-shaped palms. In the darkness he saw before him, the menacing gaze of his killer flashed. He was looking at him from all sides, and there was nothing else in this darkness. There is no way out, not a single gap. Nadezhda died. And the deaf silence that literally cut the ears was proof of this. An inglorious and even stupid end awaited the prince. And after a few minutes, he thought that he had decided to take such a step in vain. He was cowardly instead of looking death in the face. If Dahak appeared anywhere nearby, he himself would come out of the darkness to him with the words:

"Then come for me!"

The despair on the Prince's face was replaced by indifference. He felt incredibly tired. The one that had been accumulating for years and tormented his soul. There was nowhere to run now. And there is no need - time seems to have stopped. It froze in place, like the executioner's axe hanging for a moment over the head of a person sentenced to death. The prince muttered something

incomprehensible, barely audible, barely moving his lips. He could not even move his hand, he was seized by a daze, he was imbued with the realization of the futility of his attempts. His imagination conjured up thousands of other outcomes, but they were all just as hopeless and doomed to failure. From the very beginning, he had no chance in this crazy race, and he only played along with fate all this time. But it hardly looked like a fight.

"It turns out that it is true that you cannot change what is written in the timeline. No one can change their fate. All life is either chasing after death or running away from it. But the result is always the same...", the Prince thought and hated himself for giving up and now only looking for excuses. For the fact that he did not find the strength to fight further. And even if he did, he would not be able to use them - he drove himself into a trap.

Now he understood what Kaileena wanted to tell him before she died. Even though she fought fate just like him, she was doomed one way or another. And she knew it, saying that the timeline is not wrong. The prince remembered the expression on her face and what was in her eyes at these words - they were very difficult for her. She contradicted herself and this tormented her even more. After all, no matter how hard she tried, death came to her at the appointed hour, as if on schedule. And this despite the fact that she was incomparably more inventive than the Prince in her attempts to avoid this death. She deceived, killed, hid, pretended and who knows what else the Empress was capable of. But the insidious joke of fate was to demonstrate to the Prince how a knowingly stronger opponent loses a battle when it is prescribed from above. Oh, this sweet moment of false hope, blind confidence in one's own superiority!

But now it's time for disappointment and remorse. The way he plunged his sword into her back was an echo of his own near future, which had already arrived. And he will fall in the same way, even if not at the hands of Dahaki, but through his fault. And justice will be done. For too long, the Prince has been prolonging his life at the expense of other people's deaths! Darius, then his entire team, including Haraz. Then Shadi, although he had no sympathy for her; and, finally, Kaileena, who never fully became the Empress he hated so much. For him, she turned out to be a person with a difficult fate, strikingly similar to his own, and therefore he understood her well like no one else. And in the face of death, she tried to tell him the most important things. But he was blinded by his luck and did not want to listen to anything. Now it's time to learn that lesson as well.

And suddenly, mentally replaying what had happened in the throne room, the Prince remembered a bright flash that literally blinded him. Kaileena's body shattered into thousands, millions of grains of sand, with such force that the Prince was thrown back and

briefly lost consciousness. He studiously ignored everything that happened after that, did not notice the signs and thought only about how to leave the Island as soon as possible, naively believing that he was stronger than his power. And in an instant, he felt this unpleasant cold that crept under his skin, clouding his mind and tearing out his soul. These were the Sands of Time, the same ones he had encountered in Azad when he had freed them from the Hourglass. Memories came alive, even though they weren't around now. This time, the Sands were imprisoned in the body of the Empress herself - this is what she owes her abilities to! And that was why she had been so weak during their fight. She was preparing for an important moment - the transfer of the Sands from her body to the Hours. It is the primary source of this evil! She had given birth to the Sands, and was going to give them the form in which he had first met them. But it was not the form that was important, but the content. This is what she has been carrying inside her for years, dooming the world to suffering and destruction. And the Prince was no different from her, in the end. That he acted unintentionally was no excuse for him, then or now. He rediscovered the Sands of Time. He helped the Empress create them! Yes, for sure, she was going to release them in some other way, but, in the end, it didn't matter. The prince was and remains the arbiter of his destruction, the destruction of his world and the sole cause of his suffering. He himself was his worst enemy. Hoping to stop Kaileena from creating Sands, he did everything for her. And now the Prince was sure that no matter how things unfolded, they would always have the same outcome.

Exhausted, the Prince sat down and sat down on the floor, resting his back on one of the walls and sliding down it. He had been thinking from corner to corner before, but now he was completely discouraged. The realization of what had happened, that the fortress was shaking not from grief for the Empress, but because of the Sands of Time unleashed, completely deprived him of strength and motivation. Another moment and he would have collapsed on his side and never got up again, if he hadn't suddenly heard the clink of the medallion, which accidentally fell out from behind the chest armor. He never had time to throw it away. Now, as the Prince reached for it, he thought for a moment how nice it would be to let it go and end up in another place and time, as it had happened to him once. The prince would be satisfied with absolutely any option other than the real one. But now all doubts were dispelled, and he simply picked up the locket from the ground, tied the knot on the rope again, and put it around his neck. He did this without any purpose, more intuitively, out of habit, than hoping for something.

The Prince's mind was filled with heavy thoughts, lingering and full of despair. As if obeying them, he fell into oblivion and stared at

one point, barely moving, only continuing to rotate the locket in his hand. The prince doubted whether he was of any use to him at all. What if it is he who attracts the beast? And the victory over Kailina is a blind accident, the providence of fate. He had good reason to believe that everything was not at all what it seemed. And he was wrong about almost everything. But this locket... Even now, it seems to save him, pulling him out of the abyss of dark thoughts and despair and forcing him to think about something else.

Suddenly, touching its embossed side with his finger, the Prince remembered the imprint of the medallion in his diary, which he had carried everywhere since he had accidentally found it in Azad. The medallion impression did not appear there by chance, and meant a lot to its owner, who was supposed to be Kaileena. But then why did Shadi wear it? After all, the book also probably belonged to the Empress. It is unlikely that Shadi would be interested in writing in a book, which may have been a diary with notes and observations. The prince had tried so many times to make out what was written in it that he had given up his unsuccessful attempts once and for all, and had hardly looked into it since. However, he still continued to carry it with him. During his entire stay on the Island, the Prince almost never even remembered it. But now he wanted to look at the print of the locket again. What if it is different from the original?

The prince felt for the diary in an inner pocket under his belt and took it out. When he opened the first page, he found that the water had washed away the ink, and the symbols had turned from incomprehensible to completely illegible. Still in the upper right corner of the page there was some kind of inscription of two lines, which were crossed out. Obviously, the writer began with some statement, but revised his views in the process of work and, considering it erroneous, crossed it out. Flipping through the notes to about halfway, the Prince found that the symbols were legible again, untouched by the water. But on some pages – it is absolutely not clear why – individual phrases were blurred. The ink, untouched by the water, had a slightly different shade from those that had been washed off. The prince continued to peer at the painfully familiar signs and felt as if he was falling through somewhere. The reality around him faded into the shadows, and the already deaf silence turned into absolute soundlessness. And in this state of detachment from the world, the Prince realized that he was beginning to understand something of what was written. Of course! He understood the speech of Kaileena and everyone he met on the Island, albeit in a very strange way, unable to explain the meaning of each single word. He perceived all the uttered phrases as if in their entirety, in the form of their essence, the meaning put into them. In their original form. This feeling had been familiar to him since that incident in

Azad, so when faced with this phenomenon again, the Prince did not attach much importance to it. He knew the real reason for this - the Sands could penetrate the mind and, merging with it, endow it with amazing abilities. The prince inevitably took advantage of this extremely useful opportunity, but he was always uneasy and resisted their influence. But what if they weren't just evil?

It's a wonder how he hadn't thought of the diary before? Perhaps he would know something more about the place where he was going. Reading was much more difficult for him, and if he had not been in this dungeon, he might not have been able to understand anything of what he had written. But now, albeit with great effort, he read about how someone (the name was not mentioned anywhere) tried to save the Island from flooding with the help of the Sands. But his attempts turned out to be a failure and new problems - he lost control of the Sands and they exposed their true nature. The prince discarded the casual thought of a moment ago about the possible usefulness of the Sands. Deception and suggestion are their basis, they are able to persuade anyone to their side, as soon as they give slack. Still, the Prince learned his lesson, realizing that he was blind and had not taken such a chance to understand more about the Sands and the Island before.

Who was the unknown person who kept these records? It was definitely not Kaileena - the story was told by a man and he spoke about completely different events and about a different time. What was her role in all this then? The narrator probably lived long before her, and Peski must be much older than the Prince had previously believed. How long ago did this happen? And why was the locket so important to him? The diary broke off in mid-sentence - then there were several torn pages, after which came the one with the imprint of the medallion. The prince carefully compared it and the locket, but did not see any difference. It was an imprint from him. Then he went back about thirty pages and immersed himself in reading again. Among the endless incidents and unpleasant discoveries that the stranger spoke of in his notes, the Prince found several mentions of the medallion, from one of which he realized that it was a relic of antiquity, its true origin was not known even to the author of the diary. He made some attempts to find out more about the medallion, but it is not known what came of it - nothing was said about it in the notes. It turns out that most of all he was attracted to the secret. The nameless narrator wanted to solve it, a mystery incomprehensibly ancient and incredibly powerful. Perhaps he knew or saw something else; something that the solution of the mystery promised. Or maybe it was a deception, another trick of the Sands? However, the age of the medallion could not be denied. Even by the standards of the narrator, he was incredibly ancient - so much so that not a single

legend or myth even reached him. The darkness of centuries thickened over the locket, not allowing even a tiny fragment of the truth about it to be seen.

The prince flipped through the diary a little longer, and then closed it and decided to walk - he was not used to sitting in one place for a long time. The book did not give him the answers he was looking for, only new questions. Except that he realized that Kailina did not play the main role in the history of the emergence of the Sands, which was rooted in the depths of centuries, in the most immemorial times. Her achievements are based on other people's discoveries, she is only a follower of the great people of antiquity. Much more powerful seers and creators, who, meanwhile, could not defeat death.

But all this did not bother the Prince too much. There was a pleasant emptiness in his mind, his gloomy thoughts receding, though there was still no room for hope. She had nowhere to come from. It couldn't seep through the grate on the ceiling like a dim light. And even if it could, then, like the light, it could not accumulate in this hall, making it brighter. But the Prince, not yet realizing it, was getting used to hopelessness and resigned himself to the lack of this very hope. And as his eyes became more and more accustomed to the semi-darkness, so his situation no longer seemed so terrible to him. He was just beginning to realize that it had almost always been like that. Everything was already very bad, since that very night. Now his situation has become only slightly worse. The situation had just finally taken shape, and in this semi-darkness he saw it even more clearly than ever. Therefore, now he was driven by simple curiosity - in the frozen time and this endless, boundless silence, every trifle, every detail was interesting. The prince examined almost every brick in the wall, pacing the hall up and down. He will still have time to return to reading the diary, although it is unlikely that he will find anything else interesting there. Only a few torn pages remained curious, which probably meant more than the entire book, including its water-washed part. But, alas, this mystery most likely died with the author.

The Prince was looking for something similar in his situation. He knew perfectly well what he had at his disposal - this concerned his position and where he was. But he wanted to find what was missing, some missing element. Something inaccessible that would complement the surrounding picture to a whole, changing it and turning something completely different. And the answer suggested itself: it is unlikely that this prison was built specifically for the Prince. In this dungeon the prisoner himself was missing. Yes, of course, he had been dead for a long time, but the Prince did not see any remains, nor decayed rags of clothes - nothing. Of course, many

years have passed since then, but the Prince has already managed to see how time flows in this place in a special way, and how slowly the fortress and everything in it age. Any other fortress would have been reduced to rubble in just a couple of centuries, and in this case, according to Kaileena, it was about millennia! Therefore, the conclusion was simpler than ever: the prisoner was able to escape from here in some incredible way. And at that moment, the Prince felt hope return to him.

Standing in front of the open door of the cell, the Prince thought that he could say nothing better about the man who was not here now than the traces he had left behind. But, like footprints in the sand, they can tell a lot, retaining, in a sense, the form of his thoughts. A person consists not only of what he stores inside himself, but also of his deeds and intentions. From yesterday and tomorrow. And from these traces it is possible to recreate his image, thoughts and feelings. It turns out that not only people have something similar to memories. The timeline is a huge repository of memories of all shapes and sizes.

Coming closer to the cell, the Prince saw that the far wall was destroyed at the base, as if a hole had been made in it. It even seemed to him that a dim light was breaking through him. It turns out that all this time, while the Prince was lamenting his failure and falling into despair, this hole was just waiting to be found? Without hesitation, he stepped inside the cell, deciding not to waste time on doubts, even though he felt like an incredible fool for giving up so easily.

It is worth noting that, even after getting used to the darkness, the Prince still had a poor view of everything around him - only general outlines. The light was too dim, and he hardly got into the cell at all, and he could well imagine the manhole. His mind could be wishful thinking, and with that thought he took that first step inside the cell. But it was not a matter of doubt. Rather, the Prince was preparing himself for the worst-case scenario. Common sense told him that such a situation was possible, but the best he could do was to make the most of any situation, even this one. But what he was not ready for was that fate would throw him something like a pleasant surprise. As soon as the Prince crossed the threshold, he found himself in a well-lit room that was still a prison cell, but instead of gray, cracked and mossy walls, the Prince saw even rows of bricks that had not yet faded with time. Behind him, the exit from the cell was covered with a trembling haze, behind which the outlines of the bars and the rest of the hall could be seen. He recognized the phenomenon at once—he had encountered it before, when he had walked through a breach in the wall into the tower on the outside of the Island, and it was as if he were in another time that existed only

within this strange bubble. At the time, the Prince hardly understood what was happening, and he had the false idea that the entire fortress would be a giant time bubble inside, in which the past was hidden. But he quickly became convinced that this was absolutely not the case. He had never seen a place like this anywhere else on the Island. And that meant they were really special. Perhaps someone deliberately hid them, wanting to keep something secret. If the past lives inside such a bubble, then does time pass in it at all?

After examining the cell, the Prince found that there were no holes on the far wall. She was completely intact at that time. Perhaps there really was something in the present, but the time bubble blocked his way and he could not verify it in any way. So he quickly switched to another question – who could be kept in such a special cell? Why was a separate hall with such a massive door built for the sake of this man? He was clearly someone special to be honored with such an honor. And, for sure, he annoyed the Empress or someone before her very much.

However, whoever he was, the Prince did not see a single mark on the walls. The prisoner did not count the weeks or months of his imprisonment, as is usually the case with prisoners. He didn't go crazy, drawing something incoherent, didn't try to leave any message. The prince was about to go outside, but as he took an accidental step forward, he felt as if he had accidentally pushed a small light object with his foot. He looked down and found exactly the same diary as his. Or rather, not the same, but the same! The prince reached into his belt and felt for the book, which was still with him. Then he hurried to bend down and take the unexpected find in his hands. How could it happen that there were two diaries? Moreover, he held both in his hands, it did not look like a forked dagger. Previously, the Prince thought that the timeline did not allow for the existence of copies. If something is transferred from one time to another, then when the traveler returns to the starting point, it will not be found again - so the Prince believed up to this point. But the timeline continued to surprise him, because what happened could no longer be another trick of the Empress - she was dead.

The prince flipped through the diary he had just found, and was convinced that it was indeed an exact copy of what belonged to him. Except that this specimen clearly did not end up in the water, so it was preserved in its entirety. And it looked fresher - the pages not only did not decay and did not crack, but on the contrary, they were preserved almost in their original form. The prince hurried to take advantage of the find and began to read the beginning of the diary (the last pages were also torn out). From it, he learned that the medallion went to Namtar - in the first half of the diary, the name of its author was still mentioned, but literally once - from his ancestors,

but the history of its origin was still unclear. Namtar accidentally discovered the Sands and was surprised to discover their strength and power. And at first, everything went really well - the Isle was transformed, and Namtar found a way to subdue and control the Sands. However, the Prince already knew how it would all end, and now he was interested in another question: was this chamber built for Namtar? It turns out that it was he who was imprisoned in it? In that case, the Prince would very much like to meet him in person and talk about the Sands. They both made the same mistake by releasing them into this world. For sure, Namtar could tell him a lot...

The Prince's thoughts were interrupted by a dull but powerful blow behind him. The sound came from somewhere in the hall, its source was outside the chamber and outside the bubble. The prince turned around and saw through the trembling haze as Dahaka broke through the grate in the ceiling and landed in the center of the hall. The beast got up from his knees and began to look around. The prince, who was standing a few meters away from him, was dumbfounded, not expecting such a turn of events. But Dahaka, even when he approached the camera at arm's length, did not see the Prince. He stood silently, barely catching his breath and afraid to move. On the one hand, right in front of him now was the opportunity he had been begging for an hour ago. But he was in no hurry to use it - the thirst for life again outweighed it, especially after all his discoveries and finds. And with each passing second, his confidence grew that he was doing the right thing - Dahaka stood in front of him, breathing heavily and continuing to gaze intently into the dark emptiness, as if suspecting or feeling something. But I didn't see anything. It turned out that the previous hiding place was not so reliable for the Prince, and now he was very happy with his find.

His assumption was correct – he was in a different time. Although at the same time he was able to see the part of the hall that remained in the present. The bubble was probably designed like a time portal, but it worked a little differently. As if only in one direction. If someone was already inside, then no one outside could get into it. And then the Prince had an idea. An assumption that would have been difficult for him to express in words. It turned out that he, being at any time, could get inside the bubble when it was free, and find himself in the past that lived in it. And this means that he could go back at any point in time, at his own will. But he didn't understand exactly how it worked—the resemblance to portals was too approximate. So he turned to his journal again, trying to find some mention or clue that would help him.

After a few minutes of cursory reading, the Prince flipped through the page with the imprint of the locket. What is he hiding, what secret? The prince ran his fingertips over the print and found

something new, something he hadn't noticed before: the crescent moon was depressed and felt like an irregularity, while the circle in the center was smooth - it was just painted. The prince checked his diary, but the pages were swollen and wrinkled from the water, and it was hard to say for sure. Returning to the copy he had recently found, the Prince decided to check how the print in it looked from the back and how it felt to the touch. This subtle subtle difference intrigued him immensely. But a second later, he discovered something more; Something he didn't even count on: on the next page, the entries continued! He was ready to swear on his own life that his copy did not contain these notes. Once he flipped through the diary up and down, carefully studying each page, but there was nothing of the kind there!

The recordings were made in the same language, but not as accurately. Obviously, these lines were written in a hurry, without a table and ink, something like charcoal. The prince was still able to make them out, not without effort, but confidently. They read as follows:

I should have kept the locket at all costs! He knows any answer and would help me escape. But now I'm locked here, and merciless time is counting down the remaining minutes of my last night. In the morning the executioner will come, and my fate will be decided. Now that the Empress has created Peski, she no longer needs me. None of the secrets I know are of interest to her anymore. I leave this journal here in the hope that someone will find it one day. It will be a warning to the finder – do not follow in my footsteps!

The prince was impressed by what he had read. This message explained an incredible amount of things, but at the same time it turned out that the reality was very different from his guesses. It turns out that the door to the cell was opened not because Namtar somehow managed to escape, but because he was executed. Kailina! Had he really been imprisoned for so long? From the time he describes at the beginning of the journal to the day of the creation of the Sands of Time? This in itself was a monstrous torture. Even though the time in the bubble stood still, and he did not age, it was still completely unimaginable what he had to go through. It's amazing how he didn't go mad at all! And it is very strange that during all this time he made only one entry, which spoke only of disappointment in his own aspirations, in contrast to what he had written earlier about the follower and the continuation of the struggle.

The diary was an echo of an era that had never existed. After all, the Prince killed Kaileena in the past, changing the course of events. And this means that no one came for the prisoner and he was still able to get out on his own, but only when the rust corroded the grate. It turns out that by his actions, the Prince doomed him to further

suffering - Namtar's imprisonment lasted for another one or two thousand years. After all, he did not have a locket - apparently, despite all attempts to hide it, the locket was found.

The prince felt guilty - his actions had caused even more harm to the one who had already endured incredibly difficult trials. And if he was not sure that he was able to help himself in any way, he decided to free the prisoner, who, moreover, would be able to shed light on many secrets. All he had to do was figure out how he could get out of here with the locket. The prince had no doubt that it was all about him, as the last entry in his diary clearly stated.

What was said in the text made the Prince look at it from a different angle. He has been saying from the very beginning that the locket is a kind of key to the doors in the flow of time. With its help, it is possible to travel at the right time. But now the Prince finally understood what his destiny was. He was a conduit between human consciousness and the Sands, and that is why he was so valuable. And if at first the Empress used it for evil, to cloud his mind and confuse him, then later there were many examples of how the medallion turned out to be useful for the Prince, helping him out of many hopeless situations. As an intermediary, the medallion could work in the opposite direction, transmitting knowledge to a person through touch. And, even though it was deceptive and dangerous in many ways, but in some situations it could still be saving.

This knowledge could even be dangerous for the Sands. But if a person who came into contact with them with his consciousness turned out to be strong enough, he could even learn to control them - this is what else the Prince learned from Namtar's notes. And they obeyed, acting, first of all, in accordance with their nature. They may have resisted it, having excellent goals, but they were slow and clumsy on such a small time scale. Enough time had to pass for the resistance to take shape and change something.

Gripping the locket tighter in his hand and closing his eyes, the Prince saw instead of the usual darkness the golden light of a million grains of sand that were slowly floating around him. At the boundaries of the bubble, the glow was especially distinct. Everything around him suggested that he was inside a sand vortex, like forming in portals. But it was larger and had a different shape, and peace and quiet reigned inside it. Now, seeing this similarity, the Prince was looking only for the last link in the chain of answers - how exactly to force Peski to bend to his will? Unlike portals, which were already connected to a specific point in time, this place was not tied to anything. The Bubble was incomparably more powerful and could help the Prince move at any time he wished. But his first attempt failed—realizing that it didn't make sense to go back two thousand years, when the bars were still locked and the prisoner was there, he

tried to concentrate on a point in time that was only an hour earlier than the current one. But in vain. However, this failure was special - the Prince felt that he was using the locket correctly, it was only that the bubble was resisting his will. It was as if the Prince was trying to move a whole mountain. He felt that he was applying force in the right direction, but it was simply not enough. And then the Prince realized that it didn't make sense. He just needed to find a way out, not try to take the entire bubble with him. It turned out that the effort had to be applied to the border separating him from the rest of the world. In this, at first glance, thin and fragile shell, he had to somehow open a kind of door.

The place he was in was truly special. Since time flowed in it in a completely different way, it existed as if at the intersection of realities, different worlds with a different course of events. And the Prince was even afraid of being in a different timeline from which he had come here. One input and many outputs – how to choose the right one? At some point, it even seemed to him that this was not a bubble that existed inside the rest of the world, but on the contrary, an inside-out world existed inside a bubble. And since he could not move this block, it meant that the Prince had to use it to influence the course of time of everything that stretched beyond its borders. He must influence it with the help of a medallion, but from the outside. However, by leaving the bubble, he will achieve nothing. But he could not separate himself and the locket either - this relic had too short a memory, the Prince was convinced of this when he tried the trick of going back in time for a few seconds. The locket was incapable of such a thing, it was not as powerful as the dagger. He was more of a tool, an intermediary, but nothing more. And so the only possible way the Prince saw was to try to catch this fine line when he himself was still inside, and the locket would already be outside. And he put it out in front of him, squeezing it by the rib with his fingertips, literally with his nails, and repeated the mental efforts that he had made before.

Nothing happened, and the Prince just stepped forward and came out of the bubble - he couldn't think of anything better than to check if his idea worked or not. There was no Dahaki in the hall, and the same dim light shone from above, through the bars. When the Prince's eyes became a little more accustomed to the darkness, he saw that the door to the dungeon was open. He succeeded! He went back in time, just a little, an hour or so - he was hardly capable of more than a medallion. He had not yet run through this door and cut the rope, and Dahaka had not chased him through all these halls. So the path was clear, and now he needed to find a portal to go back in time and rescue the prisoner.

Having found a way out, the Prince overcame the ascent, then a long narrow gorge - the only way to the prison, above which there were patrol posts in the rocks and passages between them in the form of narrow bridges. The steep walls of the gorge and its width made it simply impossible to escape. Vigilant vigilant guards will not let anyone in - any fugitive will definitely be caught.

Meanwhile, the Prince was still in a state of confusion. It seemed to him that everything was somehow too easy. That from any, even the most hopeless situation, he somehow finds a way out, over and over again. But instead of rejoicing in it, he felt an agonizing longing, fearing that none of it was real. As if all this happens somewhere in a dream, and not in reality. It seemed that one more step and everything would melt, get lost in the fog and slip away like a mirage.

At the end of the gorge was another steep staircase that led to the Watchtower, which the Prince had visited twice. He took a quick look at the road along which the Creature had traveled when they met, but decided not to follow it, but to return to the tower - there was a portal.

It differed from the bubble in that it could not be controlled as easily by choosing a point in time. The time portal had been subordinated to the Empress's will beforehand, whereas the bubble he had discovered was designed a little differently. Even though he possessed incomparably greater power, he did not make such an impression. It was more like a raw material, the material from which it was possible to create something with the help of the right tool. And it seemed that from the very moment of his appearance, the Prince was the first to do anything in this direction. Prior to that, the colossal accumulation of Sand only kept time inside the bubble in one place.

The locket, as before, transported the Prince to the past, at the very moment when he left it after Kaileena's death, naively believing that he had been rid of the nightmare that had haunted him for the past seven years. But now he was going back to what he had left behind. And it is likely that Dahaka will now haunt the Prince even in the past.

The Prince, having found an inconspicuous door in the training hall - the last time he was too carried away by the pursuit of the Creature not to notice it - ended up in the soldiers' barracks. Everywhere there were signs of destruction, the Sands he had unleashed havoc, and the walls still shook under the onslaught of the powerful elements. There was no one around, and the Prince reached the tract leading through the gorge to the prison without hindrance. And even here he did not meet any resistance - the bridges between the lookout points collapsed, blocking the passage, which, however, the Prince crossed without much difficulty.

During all this time, neither on the way forward nor on the way back, to his great relief, he never met Dahaka. The prince was surprised at this: according to his guesses, the monster should have already come for him. He was always waiting for the monster to appear at the most inopportune moment. But there was no one around, and the Prince continued his journey unhindered.

Left to himself, he thought about the Sands. He was very concerned about the knowledge he had gained from them through the locket. He could not get rid of it, but he had the feeling that fate was manipulating him, trying to persuade him to master more and more knowledge of the power of the Sands of Time. He was afraid of becoming their slave and losing his will. The prince defined this knowledge as forbidden, and tried to use it as rarely as possible, solely for his own survival. In addition, he had a great example in front of his eyes - Namtar, who started with something like this. But he didn't have time to see the hidden danger that the Sands held before it was too late. The prince did not want to repeat other people's mistakes, because he had already made enough of his own. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't fully control his thoughts. He couldn't forget any of it, couldn't just get rid of this knowledge, like the Ring he threw into the Abyss. And, moreover, he felt his mind sinking deeper into this abyss every minute. And the most interesting thing was the strange thought that the Sands began to influence him so much right now, after the death of the Empress... He began to think that he understood their nature and how they could be controlled. And he secretly felt what enormous opportunities, what power was hidden behind this knowledge. This frightened him, another danger that made him his own enemy.

"Is there really no other way? And how far will I have to go?" the Prince mused. He even doubted whether he should go to meet Namtar at all.

Upon reaching the entrance to the prison, he went inside and found that almost none of the few prisoners survived - they were swallowed by the Sands and turned into ferocious sand monsters that could not leave their cells. Their eyes burned with yellow light and were filled with madness and cruelty. The prince hurried past them, not wanting to get involved in a fight with them, not having a dagger. In the hall that preceded the one where Namtar was supposed to be imprisoned, the Prince saw several guards who continued their rounds no matter what. Their clothing was different from that of the other soldiers of the fortress, and they wore a mace with sharp spikes as a weapon, perhaps more for intimidation than for actual use. It is unlikely that prisoners behind bars posed such a danger. But suddenly the Prince saw how one lucky man, who was not touched by the Sands, got out from behind the twisted bars and rushed to run

away. However, he was almost instantly surrounded by guards and they immediately used their formidable weapons, literally executing the fugitive. Their blows were distinguished by special force and cruelty, each of which seemed to give them pleasure, determining the meaning of their existence.

The prince was somewhat taken aback when he saw this bloodbath in front of him. The poor man barely had time to let out his death cry before parting with his life. Fortunately for him, it happened really quickly. The prince had no intention of giving up, but he knew that a fight with the guards was inevitable and this time victory would not be easy. It turns out that these soldiers were trained not only to intimidate with their appearance, but also to suppress any resistance by force.

Having dealt with the escaped prisoner and seeing the Prince, the prison guards were the first to rush to him, attacking him on the move with blows of their maces. The prince dodged and tried to strike back, but the soldiers skillfully wielded weapons and skillfully defended themselves. When he himself tried to restrain their blows, covering himself with his sword, he could hardly do it - they were so strong. The prince had to retreat - he ran up the stairs one tier higher, hoping to gain an advantage. But the guards ran after him. To parry one of the blows, the Prince threw open the doors of one of the cells with a swing and a metallic clang was heard. The blow was incredibly powerful, but the grate did its job and protected the Prince. He was amazed at how well trained these soldiers were and how eagerly they rushed into battle. Did the prison guards really require the existence of such a harsh martial school? Apparently, once this prison was overcrowded and such measures were really justified. Now it was only a relic, an echo of an ancient era. However, the echo is quite convincing. The prince had to strain all his strength just to hold back the onslaught of his opponents - there were three guards.

Soon the Prince realized that their main power and striking power were concentrated in the upper part of the body, and they hardly used their legs for combat. He slashed the shin of one of the prison guards (though they could rather be called executioners), slowing him down, and continued to retreat. Running to the corner of the hall, the Prince, feeling the enemy literally breathing down his back, grabbed one of the many columns that supported the next tier and, making one turn, stabbed the enemy in the back with all his strength. Falling, he dropped the weapon. The Prince ran up to him, but he had no time to attack - the third soldier had already raised his mace over his head and so the Prince jumped abruptly to the side. The blow fell directly on the head of the fallen jailer. At the same moment, the Prince cut off the attacker's head. He had only a fraction

of a second for this blow. By this time, another guard arrived, the one whom the Prince had wounded in the leg. He moved with great difficulty and his movements became clumsy, so the Prince easily avoided powerful blows and, seizing the moment, pushed the enemy from the second tier and jumped after him. As they landed, the Prince's sword entered the guard's body, taking his life.

The door to the hall where Namtar's cell was located was closed. The prince had to use an ingenious mechanism in order to lift a giant metal plate. Going inside, the Prince found two more guards - apparently, they had never left their post. This time, the fight went almost lightning fast - the Prince already knew the weaknesses of his new enemy and was incredibly close to his goal. This encouraged him, and within a minute the bodies of the prison guards were lying on the floor, devoured by the Sands.

There was silence all around, except for the low hum of the trembling walls and the distant metallic knocks coming from the cells with people turned into sand monsters. As the Prince had expected, Namtar's cell was locked. He peered behind the bars and saw a vague silhouette that slid like a shadow across the interior of the cell. The prince found the key from one of the slain guards, went to the door and unlocked it. The lock did not give way immediately, apparently, once closed, it was never opened by anyone else. But even after that, the door did not give way - the grating rusted and did not open until the Prince kicked it several times. Finally, it gave way, and he threw it open. Knowing that the prisoner inside the cell is vigilantly watching what is happening - most likely, he sees something like this for the first time in his life! The prince stepped away from the entrance, having previously placed his sword on the floor, thereby expressing a peaceful mood. Believing that the prisoner was unlikely to leave the cell immediately, the Prince made himself comfortable on the floor.

About ten minutes passed, and the Prince, tired of waiting, was about to say something, but suddenly he saw a dark-haired youth of about sixteen come out of the bubble. The prince was surprised at his age at first, but knowing how powerful the Sands were and how far Namtar had come in studying them, he thought it could be easily explained. The young man was silent and looked at his liberator, only for a moment glancing at the sword lying on the floor.

"What's your name?" The Prince asked, wanting to check if Namtar was really standing in front of him.

"My name is Ajit," the prisoner replied, handing the Prince back his sword.

Chapter 24. Creator

It's even worse than I thought.

Traitors turned out to be even among my students. Not only the fortress and the Island are divided in two, but also the people. Those I trusted yesterday are becoming my enemies today. One half devours the other, and I am on the side of the victim. And the predator is still just straightening its giant neck to deliver its main blow. Zulu, who had been given a new title, was now in command of an entire army - my squad would not have been able to withstand a direct confrontation with it, we were forced to hide and sit behind insurmountable curtains of sand for them. Nergal himself controls the minds and hearts of people, turning them, among other things, against me. The truth is trampled under dirty boots, the future is ruined, and I see only darkness ahead. Fate stopped talking to me. Only Jatta is still completely loyal to me, but I hear only bad news from her. The Executor of Zulu has turned the Watchtowers into a symbol of the oppression of the common people, whom he keeps in constant fear. Countless patrols, huge taxes, and near-slave labor all collapsed on their heads overnight instead of the bright future I promised them. And in addition to everything (as if this were not enough!) - crop failure, hunger and disease. And the most dangerous of them is Sand contamination. Nergal did not even think of using them for good, only for weakening and subjugation. How far is he going to go? And can there be a limit to his excesses at all?

After all this, I was forced, without finishing the creation of the Clock, to throw it to him ahead of schedule. To confuse him, to deceive him, was all I had to do. The watch did not give me the strength I had hoped for, it only distracted his attention to itself. Making it look like I was hiding something very important, I allowed his convoy to get them. But he did not have a dagger, and for a long time he only walked around them, examining and listening. I don't know if he knew exactly what to do, or if he was moving by touch, at random, but he soon decided to follow my path—his cunning knows no bounds—and create an object like a dagger, endowed with special powers, to which the Clock would be under control. It was a staff with a top in the form of a snake's head. But it turned out to be negligible, even for an unfinished version of the Clock. In this, I clearly surpass him. This staff turned out to be capable of only small pranks - it allowed you to control time, but literally within one day. He could create monsters out of people or vice versa, draw Sand from them (this killed monsters) without being soaked in it and without becoming more powerful. And everything happened quite slowly and pointwise - Nergal could not completely subdue even a part of the Abyss. And even more, in an attempt to do so, he was

badly burned several times - the Sand got out of control, completely ceased to obey and caused destruction in half of the fortress. Many people died, and Nergal did not even think of stopping, creating new monsters from the remains of old ones.

I must keep the things I have safely covered. If he had access to a dagger or a locket, he would be unstoppable. Perhaps it would be better to destroy them instead of hide them? ***It's good that he doesn't know all the secrets, and this diary keeps them safe.***

But do I myself know all the secrets that these magical objects hide? It's time to ask questions of eternity and find answers. Memory, like an echo of the past, lives on for a long time and keeps fragments of memories. I suddenly felt the wonderful magic of simple touches – through them, like a reflection in a mirror, I can see this past. Beyond the distance, thousands of years before this moment: the days when the medallion was created and man first touched it. I hear it like strange music in the distance – the dull beats of drums somewhere beyond the horizon of time calling me on a journey. I go where no man has ever set foot before. And I myself will not be fully human. I will only be a disembodied observer, a voiceless breath of wind. If I don't get lost, if I don't get lost somewhere along the way, then I will see a great beginning. Perhaps even the very origin of the Sands! And this will allow me to know their weakness.

Namtar's Diary, Entry 77

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The ghost sat in the boat, opposite Masgik, and looked into his eyes. They were full of aspiration, literally burning with the desire to achieve the goal. He leaned more and more heavily on the oars, despite his fatigue and the almost impenetrable darkness, barely diluted by the light of the stars and the young moon. His mind was fixed on the goal that had haunted him for months. The Masgeek felt that if he did not carry out his plans, his life would be lived in vain. He was the only one who saw what the others did not see, the only one who understood the secret signs. And now he was sailing to the truth, bravely battling the waves. He constantly felt the clothes on his chest, afraid of losing the locket that hung around his neck.

The ghost, even if he could, didn't try to talk to him or stop him now, even though he knew perfectly well what Masgeek was up to. And how can you stop the creator? In this magical, fragile moment of creation? The ghost was allowed to watch him and how he created a new world. It wasn't known exactly what drove Masgeek, or who he thought he was, but they both knew exactly what he was doing.

One day, about four months ago, Masgik went hunting. The road back was long and difficult, and he spent the night in the forest. He found an open clearing on the hill, built a fire and stretched out on the ground, looking up at the sky. But, after a few minutes, he realized that he did not want to sleep at all, and decided to walk along the edge of a small cliff, examining the night distance. The island, from which point Masgik could see almost the whole of it, curved gently, thickening in the middle, and stretching sharply into the depths of the sea. It was called Usakar. People on the island have long noticed that its shape is very similar to the moon moon that was shining that night. That thought was on his mind now—it was the first time he had seen it so clearly. The surface of the ocean and the sky were a mirror of each other. The moon is the celestial earth (it was also called the "celestial mountain"), which the sky gave birth to in response to the birth of the land by the ocean. Sometimes it became larger, but then it certainly decreased, just as the land experienced the constant ebb and flow of ocean waters. Such was the world as it was known to all the inhabitants of the island, including Masghik himself. An endless ocean, an endless sky and two lands - his native island and the moon. And nothing else, not a single piece of land to the very line of confluence of sky and ocean, which cannot be reached by any boat. And only the stars have caused questions among people since time immemorial. What did they want to say, bizarrely forming drawings in the sky? Why were some of them brighter than others? And where is their reflection? After all, there was no other land around!

The Masgik suddenly found himself asleep, sitting at the edge of the cliff - he sat down for just a minute, and sleep immediately overtook him. Reluctantly, he got up and returned to the fire - the night was cold and sooner or later he would still reach for warmth. He threw a couple of logs into the fire and fell asleep again. In it, Masghik saw himself walking in absolute solitude - there was not a soul on the whole island. Suddenly he heard a voice, but there was still no one around. He came from everywhere – from the earth, from the air and from within himself. He couldn't make out a word—it didn't sound like anything at all—not like a man's speech or an animal's cry. But he was still sure it was a voice. He closed his eyes in his sleep and saw, in absolute darkness, how these unknown words turned into images - from the darkness the ocean was born, and the sky echoed it. Another moment and he was standing on land, on a well-known island. Although he could hardly recognize him in this form, the image conveyed only the very essence, but not the details. He saw only himself clearly. In his hand, out of nowhere, was a locket made of a strange metal that he had never seen before. He glanced at it (still keeping his eyes closed) and immediately felt the cold of metal

in his hand. He opened his eyes, and his voice suddenly stopped. But the locket was now in his hand. And he knew somehow what he had to do with it. The medallion depicted either an island or a lunar moon. Masgik squeezed it between two palms, holding them horizontally, and closed his eyes again. In this layer of his dream, he seemed to have power over the world around him. He squeezed his palms harder, and the island almost disappeared, sinking into the water. At the same time, the medallion began to feel almost flat, without a relief pattern. He stretched one palm up, and the island rose above the ocean again. Then he found the brightest star in the sky and obscured it with the tip of his index finger, as if touching it. And then he touched the medallion in the center and pulled his finger up. And the ground shook under his feet - he opened his eyes and saw another island growing out of the ocean, looking more like a large mountain.

"Find me," a voice suddenly said to him clearly.

Masgik woke up at dawn and found a cold stone in his hand, which he had apparently grabbed in his sleep. Without paying much attention to this, he went home, forgetting about the strange dream and thinking only of how he could get to his hut as soon as possible.

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A few days passed - Masgik stood on the shore and waited for a fishing boat with an evening catch. Out of boredom, he picked up a round smooth stone lying next to him and threw it into the water. And at the very moment when the stone flew out of his hand, something happened to Masgeek - he felt a little dizzy, it seemed to him for a second that he was not in his body and was doing something on behalf of another person. A moment later, the stone plopped down into the water, on the surface of which a depression first briefly formed, and then a splash. The Masgeek closed his eyes, trying to cope with the dizziness, and finally lost himself. He remembered his strange dream. And he saw a huge mountain growing out of the water ahead. Frightened, he opened his eyes, and, of course, saw nothing but the surface of the water. It seemed that a fishing boat loomed somewhere in the distance, but he was no longer interested. Who he was a moment ago remained in time on the other side of the closed eyelids. He heard the revelation and was changed forever. He became what he thought he was a second ago. That other person. Man? Another moment and he took off and rushed somewhere. The fishermen who arrived at the usual place did not find Masghik on the shore. He was considered eccentric before - once upon a time he lost his sister (he had no wife and children) and since then he has behaved a little strangely, and now no one would want to

deal with him at all. From time to time, the inhabitants of the island saw him - emaciated, dirty and wildly looking around. Sometimes he even said something or shouted, but rather isolated words and phrases that seemed meaningless to everyone. He called himself the overlord (never specifying what) and preferred to sleep in deep holes that he dug all over the island, trying to dig as deep into the sand as possible.

"I hear her, she's calling me!" He once said to someone, grabbing him by the arm. He recoiled and hurried away.

He himself did not care much what people thought of him. He felt as if he was completely alone on the island. One day he was tired of searching and almost despairing. He found someone whom he could have called his friend more often than others and told him his story, fragmentary and incomprehensible, but more accessible than usual:

"I had a dream, you know? It had everything! This island, the ocean, the sky and the moon. And even more! You see, the world is not yet completely created! I saw a flash, an insight! I have a special knowledge, you'll see! The dead are not dead, the sky and the ocean are not in balance. Everything moves, everything changes, if you want it. The sleeper must wake up! Masgeek said confusedly, literally shouting out every phrase.

"Then what are you looking for?" He dug holes everywhere like a madman. What kind of special knowledge is this? His interlocutor asked ironically. He understood that the poor man had gone mad, but he was completely harmless to the others. He wondered how Masgeek would explain his behavior - although his story was a stupid invention, it had some meaning in it.

Masgeek told him that he was looking for a piece of unknown metal. He had a great idea of what it looked like, he remembered it in every detail. It even seemed to him that he had seen such a thing a long time ago in his childhood, when he played together with his sister, but now he could not find anything like it. He should have gone back in time, but he clearly could not do it.

–Hmm... If you can't find what you're looking for on land, why don't you search in the ocean? It is endless, there is anything! His friend replied to him reasonably and quite seriously. He decided that if Masgik found what he wanted, then maybe he would calm down and come to his senses. He will forget his nonsense and return to normal life. But he couldn't even think what Masgeek was really going to do.

As soon as he caught the thought of his interlocutor, he jumped up from his seat, and, without listening to him, ran away. He just shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment, not considering it necessary to say anything else or follow him.

Running to the water, Masgik threw himself into it without stopping. After swimming for a while, he began to dive, trying to see or feel something on the bottom - at such a distance from the shore it was still quite achievable even for such an inexperienced diver.

While his hands were busy feeling the bottom, his head was buzzing with a swarm of new thoughts. First of all, what a fool he is that he did not think of looking in the sea himself! Secondly, there must have been someone before him, but made a mistake and did something wrong. Emerging from the water once again, Masgik saw a bright star that burned just below the moon. Someone found the medallion in the past, but chose the wrong place! All these stars are reflections of non-existent lands, other people's mistakes. Oh, if he had a chance - he would have found the very place! But each of his attempts ended in nothing. However, he didn't even think of giving up, diving like a possessed man over and over again. He was literally ready to give up his life after hearing an unknown voice just once. He incredibly changed Masgik, his entire consciousness. It was as if he had seen something, seen the light, knew the greatest revelation, and now the meaning of his life was only in one thing.

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It is unknown how much time has passed since the last dive when Masghik found himself lying on the sand by the ocean. The surf rustled and night was already approaching - somewhere in the sky the first stars lit up. What happened to him? Was it all a dream? Then where did he find himself, in which of the worlds? Which of the parts of everything that had happened was true, and which was just a fantasy? He felt lost, cut off from the world. What he believed in could simply never exist! What day is it? Could it be the one when he stood on the shore, waiting for the fishermen to return?

He stood up on his hands and looked around. He did not have enough strength for more now - confusion and weakness took their toll. Suddenly, it caught his eye that somewhere in the distance there were several boats sailing. Fishermen return with an evening catch. It's over. All in vain. A mirage, a dream, a chance vision. Masgik lay back on the sand and sobbed, choking on his own helplessness.

A few minutes later, there were splashes of oars, someone's talking, then jumping into the water and soft blows of boats on the sandy shore.

"Have you come to your senses?" Fool, have you decided to drown yourself? Dive so deep, you're crazy! One of the newcomers said, addressing Masghik.

"We had to pull you out of the water and take you ashore!" Because of you, we lost half of our catch today! Someone added.

"Next time, we'll just leave you, nothing but trouble!" Only be kind - drown yourself safely and do not occupy our land anymore. Without you, it will only become freer here! The old man, who was the last to get out of the boat, said angrily. He was so angry that someone even stopped him with his hand so that nothing bad would happen.

"Go away," he said dryly.

Masgik felt an incredible surge of energy. He literally jumped to his feet, shouting:

"Not in vain!" It's not in vain!

And he ran headlong somewhere. None of the standing fishermen understood what exactly had happened - they just looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and began to unload the modest catch. Everyone had long been accustomed to his strange, inexplicable behavior and did not attach much importance to him.

But Masghik did not care about them again. He became even more entrenched in his desire to awaken the mountain sleeping at the bottom of the ocean and make the island large so that there would be room for everyone, even outcasts like him. And to those who once died. Perhaps others will someday understand him and accept what he bestows upon them.

He did not know at all where he was running. With no specific purpose, Masgeek simply hid from sight so as not to anger the fishermen. He stopped and looked at the moon. Its full disk shone against the already black sky, and next to it hung a pale star that he had not seen yesterday. It was as if the heavenly earth was rejecting a part of itself. Or, on the contrary, it gave birth to a new life.

The full moon was very different from the island itself, which had always been shaped like a crescent moon. Masghik knew now that it wasn't the tides that mattered, it was all up to him. But he was incredibly far behind the heavens—their ability to further create the world was more pronounced and productive. He didn't understand all the clues given to him well enough, and he was obviously doing something wrong since he hadn't found the locket or anything to make it out of.

Gradually, he made his way to the edge of the cliff and stared into the distance. Everywhere the endless ocean rustled. A vast void in the center of which lay this island. Maybe it's not that the heavens prevent him from creating, but the ocean itself? Having once given birth to land and people, he hates his own creation and does not want to continue all this. He wants to reign supreme over the endless expanses, alone. One and only. Leave behind the stupid competition with the heavens. To abolish the very existence of the past and future is to erase the point of reference of time that began with the appearance of land. Masgik suddenly felt that he could ask heaven

for help in his confrontation with the ocean. He did not want to sink into oblivion, erasing time and all hope for change. He wanted to rule this world – to create new lands and command time. He kicked a boulder lying at the edge of the cliff, it rolled and fell noisily into the water. Oh, if only he could find enough rock and earth to expand the island, winning piece by piece from the water!

Help came to him in a dream, when he was tired of his thoughts, fruitless hopes, and fell asleep, sitting under a tree and looking at that very star. In his sleep, it trembled, becoming brighter and paler. It changed its color, turning from white to bright yellow, and then, suddenly, almost red. Masgik stretched out his hand to her in supplication, and suddenly she flew across the sky, leaving a trail behind her. As a child, his sister taught him to make a wish when he saw her. But as luck would have it, this almost never happened, or he simply did not have time. But now, his only wish was so tight in him that it took moments to make it happen. It seemed that the star flew through the sky longer than usual. At an unusual angle, straight to the ground! He saw it fly into the forest somewhere in the depths of the island. A short flash flashed at the place of the fall, and a terrible crack and crash was heard.

Masgik woke up from another thunderclap. A thunderstorm broke out over the island. He looked around the sky, but he couldn't see the moon or the stars. Without hesitation, he went to the place where the star had fallen. Because of the pouring rain, he could not see the road and the place where he was heading well. After descending from the cliffs, he ran, relying only on how well he knew the island. The illusory hope was the most real thing for him now, more real than all his past life. Trying to navigate the smoke will not help him, even if he saw it - the rain will extinguish everything before he gets to the right place. Everything again depends only on him.

Half an hour later, Masgeek was standing near a fallen charred tree, not far from the place where he had seen the dream with the mysterious voice. A small molten piece of red metal lay nearby. He held out his hand, and it was already cold. The ghost was not at all surprised by this - this shapeless piece of iron had lain here for thousands of years. It did not fall from the sky - the lightning that struck nearby only slightly distorted its original shape. Once upon a time, an ancient volcano ejected this metal from its vent before going underwater and fading away forever. But Masgik believed otherwise and was blind. Like any true Creator. He lost the boundary between reality and dream. The reality now was that he was clutching a cherished locket in his hands, waiting only for it to be given its real form. And then Masgik will finally be able to carry out all his plans.

The metal itself was really unusual - the Sands, at the dawn of time, not wanting to disappear completely, melted a part of

themselves into this piece in order to survive, even if they got into the water. After all, water will destroy the Sands if they come into contact with it. Sealed in metal, they could wait for thousands of years for someone to find them. It doesn't matter where - at the bottom of the sea or in the middle of the forest thicket. And the time has come. All it takes is a touch and the Sands can get closer to the human mind. People have always underestimated the power of touch. It has a special power, it can transmit energy and knowledge, it can even change what a person touches! Although much depends on the person himself. If he is weak, then it can work against him – like an open door, a touch will let something alien and destructive into the soul and mind of a person. And the shape of the medallion is only the fantasies of a person under the influence of this strange force, which simply determine the appearance of those creations that he thinks he produces himself. However, it does not matter at all how it looks. What is important is the essence of creation, its true essence, its hidden powers. And these forces are now rushing into Masgik's mind. If someone were standing next to him now, they would see how his eyes flashed red for a second, then yellow, and then returned to their normal appearance.

The sands are a powerful force, one of the natural elements, but they need a vessel – the human mind, interaction with it. Therefore, Peski can become similar to the one with whom they are in contact. But only if this person is not afraid of them, but has enough courage to command them. Otherwise, they penetrate so deeply into a person that he ceases to be himself, becoming part of the single body of the Sands. A person turns into an obedient puppet, pursuing goals that seem to her own and incredibly important. But the Sands would become so dangerous many centuries later, and now they were like a child. As if they were a wounded and frightened animal, licking its wounds. And Masgeek was still acting more of his own free will, even though his mind was clouded.

At night, he snuck into the village while everyone was asleep, hoping to steal a suitable tool to shape a piece of metal. The one he saw in his dream. Though he himself was more accustomed to regard it as a vision, a divine revelation, Masghik regarded it as something extremely serious, real. The only important thing.

After wandering from one hut to another, trying to make as little noise as possible, he came across a blacksmith's house. Next to him, under a canopy, knives made by him and various tools necessary for work were stored. Hammers, tongs, and bellows were useless, but a few minutes later Masgeek happened to stumble upon a grindstone lying on the edge of the table, so that the shadow of the canopy blocked it from the moonlight. He rejoiced, grabbed the stone, and hurried away from the village, where he was now an intruder.

Masgeek spent the next few weeks working a small piece of metal, first shaping it into the shape of a disc and then carving out the crescent moon symbol and a small circle. He lost track of time, eating only occasionally, when he was so weak that he could hardly work. All his attention was focused on the future medallion. During this time, the Sand fused into him paved the way into the depths of his consciousness, increasingly capturing him and dragging him along with its goals. And Masgeek saw the medallion as a missing element that needed to be thrown into the water in the right place to give birth to the coveted mountain. He considered himself the only one who was able to read the signs in the surrounding nature, hear the secret call and find enough strength in himself to selflessly follow it to the very end.

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And then the day came. Or rather, the night of that very day. The boat flew gently over the waves, accelerated by the oars that Masgeek rowed with all his might. The ghost read a whole range of emotions on his face - delight, fear (not the kind that makes you retreat in horror, but rather the excitement that pulls you forward to the unknown) and a premonition of liberation. His whole life is now drawn to this point in time. It didn't even make sense what would happen after. Only now. It is not known what exactly drove Masghik at that moment - his desires and dreams were intertwined so that they were inseparable from each other. Instead of dealing with it, he just kept rowing forward, and the Ghost watched the creator.

At some point, Masgeek abruptly began to slow down the boat - he suddenly felt that this was the very place. He took a locket from his pocket, stretched his hand above the water, and froze for a moment. A moment that will change everything. A thin line between two different worlds – the past and the future. So different, and all thanks to him!People on the island in the time of Masghik lived a simple life - fishing, did not know how to keep track of time, did not rush and experienced trembling fear only of the Ocean. At first, they are unlikely to accept what will happen. They will take him for an even greater madman than now. But the real madness would be to stop now.

And he did not hesitate for more than a second. The locket, with a faint gleam of yellow light, slipped from his hand and fell into the water, rushing to the bottom. And suddenly a deafening silence fell on Masgeek. The ocean subsided, the waves almost stopped beating against the side of the boat, as if he was left alone in the middle of absolute emptiness. The whole world ceased to exist, everything was covered with darkness.

This went on for about an hour. All this time, Masgeek was in a slight daze, listening to the ocean. The ghost watched him, watching the feelings of disappointment, despair, and fear that he tried to push away. He didn't let the thought that nothing was going to happen go deep into his mind, and he told himself that he just had to wait a little longer. Masgik tried to imagine what was going to happen as he recalled passages from his dream. He imagined everything that was happening very figuratively, endowed it with a special meaning. He saw it as a struggle of the elements among themselves, perhaps even as a kind of competition, rather than an open confrontation. Masghik's naïve notions—the Ghost had every reason to believe them to be—were in fact not infinitely far from the truth. The ghost saw things more deeply than any of the humans, his perception of the world was much wider. Indeed, everything was generated by the ocean, which was the source of all life and its final resting place. It was the real Heart of the world, which beat from the first moment of its origin. A huge ocean of energy that gave birth, including people, whose lives, like water in a fountain, rushed upwards at first, but then slowed down and fell back into the endless womb, dissolving in it without a trace. In this ocean, all four elements were combined at the same time, coexisting in harmony. And Masgik was going to break this harmony by lifting the Sands from the ocean floor, severing their connection with the rest of the elements, indulging their deep desire to break all ties and completely own a part of the world. Or the whole world.

Silence was replaced by the roar and roar of foaming waves. The people on the island woke up to the ground beneath them shaking, shaking their homes. They could hear the hum too. Everyone jumped out in horror, looking at each other in fright. Nothing like this has ever happened to the island. At this time, the top of a new mountain rapidly jumped out of the water column and rushed upwards. Masgik shouted happily, clapping his hands with all his might. A few seconds later, the heaving earth reached his boat, splitting it open and throwing him to the side where there was still water. But soon his unconscious body was lifted up by a growing mountain, which before his eyes turned into a ridge of rocks, some of which had spacious plateaus on their tops.

Masgik waved his arms to the last as if he were pulling the rocks out of the water, shaping them in the same way he had done with the medallion. Medallion! He owes him... And then he lost consciousness, immersed in another dream-vision, in which he again found the locket. But this time it was easy and fast. His creation gave him strength and self-confidence. He did everything right, he continued the great course of creation and changed the world. And this feeling of his most of all delighted and captured the Ghost. He felt that it was

this that was completely real, so human and completely sincere. The sands whispered to him what to do. But they did not say how exactly and even more so why. He himself created this new world, even if he did not fully understand the essence of what was happening.

The next morning, the people of the island will see a huge mountain - no one will understand that it was the Sands that allowed it to grow in such a short time, speeding up the passage of time - on a once completely empty horizon. They will go there and meet Masghik, who will come out to them as the messiah, the prophet and the creator of the miracle. But they will see in him only a complete and hopeless madman, a malicious person who has connected with the wrong forces of nature and almost destroyed their entire life. He will try to show them the locket to intimidate and confirm his strength, but he will be beaten and the relic will be taken away so that he does not have time to do more work. The medallion will be taken from the mountain back to the island and safely hidden by the elders. Everyone will be afraid of his unknown power. Not wanting to cause even more trouble, the elders will decide not to try to destroy him or seize his power. It is then that a strict instruction will appear, which will be passed from one of its guardians to another: "The medallion must never leave the island." Over time, its true meaning will be forgotten and lost, and the island and the mountain will become one - huge plains will slowly rise from the depths of water. And people will get used to living in a new world, forgetting about what was, not even leaving a legend. And Masghik will find the Sand Abyss, but now, for real, having gone mad, he will throw himself into it, unable to regain the locket, risking his life in the hope of a miraculous connection with the Sands. For a while, the mountain will grow, shaking the island from time to time. The abyss will haunt people, causing them fear and anxiety, and then the idea of throwing stones at it will be born, which will then turn into an incomprehensible tradition. In this form, it will reach Namtar, and he will tell about it in his diary.

People will call the island-mountain in the ocean Saggig [*note: from the Sumerian "saĝ gíg ga" – "black head"*]. It will frighten people for a long time and disturb their minds, but in time they will get used to it. The mountain will grow and the two parts of the Island will merge into one piece of land. And just as the outer part of the island will gradually encircle the mountain, so the name "Usakar" [*note: from the Sumerian "usakar" - "crescent"*] will encircle the name "Saggig" on both sides. And, in the end, the Island will be called "Usaggigkar". In this name, all meanings and meanings are intertwined. The old ones will be almost forgotten - no one will remember that the Island was once not a single whole. Maybe only Peski.

Over time, everyone forgot about the fears associated with the central island and the mountain. A castle was erected on it and people considered it a blessing that the Island became larger than in former times. In legends, the Masgik turned from a madman into a deity who divided heaven and earth and completed the creation of the world. He brought a revelation to the people – although everyone found it difficult to explain what it was – and left them, going to the underworld. His name was almost forgotten and overgrown with myths and fables, completely erasing the appearance of the real Masghik from history. It became weightless and imperceptible, like the wind.

All of these intermediate events flew in front of the Ghost in an instant, at the speed of lightning. As many as two thousand years. They didn't really matter, because from Masghik to Namtar, in all this time, there is not a single daredevil, who would challenge nature itself, the whole world, and try to embody the will of man in a great creation. And he had to see both stories with his own eyes. He wasn't human himself—the Ghost felt it better than ever before—but he could just as change the world around him. Closing and reopening his eyes, he saw a world around him that was completely unlike the human one. Ghost World. In which, in fact, he was completely alone, except for Jatta.

Now he was finally fully prepared for what this world offered him. Something that the human world that he had clung to for so long could not offer him. Freedom to create. To change something, and not to lament that you are unable to influence anything. The ghost has learned a lot and now he is ready. In the end, you need to somehow brighten up your own loneliness. From now on, all the time of the world was at his disposal.

The air was different, not so transparent, in a misty haze that had a distinct orange hue, which seemed to illuminate everything around it with some kind of flame. The earth was also completely different - ash-gray, from which some threads or whole shreds flowed upwards. And everywhere he went, it was the same. There was simply nothing to catch the eye. but as a special gift. He realized that he could give this place any appearance, any form. He, like Masgik [*note: from the Sumerian "mašĝik" – "night vision*"], finally understood that the process of creation of this world was not yet completed. It can be said that it has not even begun yet. How similar are he and Masgeek? Has he surpassed him? Unlike the Masgic, the Ghost was really able to change things at will, without relying on chance or inventing incredible explanations for an accidental, albeit truly unique, coincidence. Would he have been here, would he have existed at all, if it hadn't been for Masgeek? Perhaps no creator can see the true scale of his creation and what will follow.

The ghost planned to build a huge castle in this realm of orange-gray emptiness, surrounded by mountains on one side and an abyss as black as night on the other. A huge bridge will be thrown over the abyss, the columns of which go somewhere down, into the very depths of the abyss, changing their shade from marble white to dark purple, before finally disappearing from sight. The Ghost was inspired by the fortress on the Isle of Time - for all its dark secrets and danger, it was the true jewel of the Island. He took ideas one by one, waved his hands (although it was not necessary at all) and they were implemented. His castle was higher, lighter, and more spacious. He could now stroll along the many wide balconies, enjoying the views he had created. It was always evening in this place. At that fragile moment when the sun is about to set below the horizon and get dark. But this did not happen. The moment froze, a slight chill hung in the air. Of course, he wasn't going to stay here forever. But he always wanted to come back here, so this place must be special, always pleasant, despite the immense loneliness.

He was going to fight boredom by continuing his short journeys - no matter in time or in space. And this castle was a continuation of himself and his ideas. Separate corridors led at a specific time or place. As soon as he crossed the threshold, he was there. He could stack entire dimensions in the halls, unfolding them into worlds simply by approaching them. The castle became the center of his world and, at the same time, its shell. He was everywhere and nowhere at once. With each crossing, everything turned inside out relative to the place where he came. And there were no boundaries, even Time itself was receding before this place.

The world of a ghost is his imagination. Made up only of memories and experiences, it will quickly fade away, become faceless and weak. He needs nourishment, and the Ghost has been working hard to do so. He asked questions of eternity – and always received answers. It even quickly became a habit for him and ceased to surprise him. The most interesting thing was to come up with the right question. And then the answer was truly desired, it satisfed, at least for a while, his curiosity. Often, he preferred to gain new knowledge and experience from his travels - he could be anywhere and anytime, see any event. And it was the unpredictability of the people he observed that fueled his interest in such an existence the most. He is an eternal observer. He can see and learn anything. His experience is invaluable and immense. And that's why it's even dangerous – no human mind could withstand such a volume. But he had no opportunity to pass on this knowledge. The universe decreed otherwise.

The Ghost was deprived of everything else - he could not feel a breath of wind, a drop of rain on his skin, or even a simple touch. He

did not dream like humans, because he did not sleep at all. He did not experience hunger, did not know physical pain and did not suffer from diseases. Even the fact that he walked around the castle was a convention - he could, for example, fly. Or make the lock move relative to yourself. The only thing that resembled human sensations was granted to him the moment he found Jatta. He could stroke her soft white fur, look into her eyes and see the response in them - what he missed most. Let it be just a dog, an animal. But she was his best friend in the whole world. And the last thing she cared about was how ugly he looked. And together they traveled, without stopping. As if they were looking for something, something incredibly special and unique. Something that even the Ghost cannot create himself.

Being outside of time, he saw events in a special way. Like a person who looks at a river, sees its source, bed, tributaries, and knows something about how far, far it flows into the sea. The ghost felt like he was in the same place, but at different times. In any of the times. The images that he saw in front of him blurred, superimposed on each other, mixing into a single stream of colors. But he could always be in one place, no matter what it was: to sit in Masghik's boat, watch Namtar, or follow the Prince in his tossing and turning around the Island of Time. He could change places as quickly as he wanted, but he could not divide into several parts. And time for him was now measured only by memories and something else unknown, unknown. What he didn't know yet was the future. What he has already gone through is the past. And in such a system of counting time, he could exist with only one speed – his mind. As for the future of humans, the Ghost realized that it was too vague and uncertain. Once upon a time, the Sands dictated their will, and the fate of the entire world was spelled out to the smallest detail. Those who went to the future with the help of portals got only into the version of it that was provided by the Sands. Now, after rescuing Ajit, the Ghost is convinced that sometimes fate can be changed, and versions of the future are as numerous as the stars in the sky. But the passage of time does not revolve around one specific person – the changes must be more significant and deep – only then will the river flow along a new channel.

However, the Ghost knew for sure that it was hardly possible to change his nature. Who he really was. And the best he could do (and has already done) is to accept everything as it is. The eternal wanderer, the keeper of wisdom – anything but man. And if there was anything in him from people, then it was now rapidly running away. It was not known if he would be able to get rid of it completely, but there was no turning back anyway. And he will not be able to end his life in any way. The only thing he could do was to continue to develop his imagination, which replaced his dreams - sometimes it was

incredibly difficult to overcome the mental turmoil and find peace. A person is always helped by a dream, and a Ghost is always helped by a long journey without any plan and restrictions. He could fall into the abyss for hours just by jumping off the bridge into the purple abyss. When darkness covered everything around him, he began to see the stars, which were arranged in a new order each time. And with every second they swept past him faster and faster. And a small spot of light somewhere above completely disappeared from sight. The abyss had no bottom, just as there was no end to its eternal life. This fall helped him to comprehend infinity with his mind – something that the human mind, which lives perfectly well among limitations, is not capable of. It does not matter whether they are natural or invented. But now there were no restrictions for him. Except that he didn't take Jatta with him at such moments. She was not able to push the boundaries of her consciousness so widely: after all, she was only a dog. And most importantly, after a while, the Ghost managed to miss her. And coming back was always like waking up in the morning.

So who is he himself? What is its purpose and purpose? Those questions didn't matter now, either. He could change endlessly, be anyone and anything. No matter how hard he tried, he would never cross eternity. And any goal was quite illusory, on the scale of the Universe – just a momentary idea. And the complete impossibility of interacting with the real world even looked somewhat logical. He is not even granted to leave footprints in the sand. Because he himself is this trace, the imprint of his past life, carved in granite. A shadow that was lost and found its own. He is a reflection in the mirror of life, which could not be born by itself, but being generated, can exist separately. Such a reflection was hardly the opposite of what gave rise to it. Rather, it is an addition to the whole. A small piece that is perfect if you attach it back. A trace by which you can judge that a man, not an animal, has passed here. And the Ghost was this reflection, completing the picture to the whole. But it could be integral without the image that gave rise to it. These ideas turned out to be true not only for people and ghosts. The entire universe was built on them. It consisted entirely of images and reflections, which in total gave an integral infinite nothing. But correctly divided – it doesn't matter whether in space or in time – they gave an incredibly rich and diverse picture. Once he realized this complex concept, the Ghost became himself. He is a creation. Every person is a creator from birth. And until his death. And, perhaps, even after it.

Chapter 25. The One Who Wasn't Defeated

It seems that a little more and I will be left completely alone. I and the few who are still loyal to me already have to hide, using all kinds of secret passages, disguises and other tricks. Nergal found a way to harness the power of the Clock, even though he did not have complete control over it. His staff had one interesting property - it was enough to touch a person for a short time, and he was infected with the Sands. Like snake venom, they slowly soaked the victim's body and gradually made him an obedient monster, driving him crazy.

All the measures I have taken are weakening before my eyes – he, one way or another, bypasses them. My mistake was that I initially defended, not attacked. But any defense will sooner or later make a breach and fall. Moreover, I was not ready to take any measures like him. How can you resist such unscrupulousness and cruelty? And he's not going to stop there, it seems like he's up to something else.

But now I am blind and no longer see the future. Although, it seems as if I have seen the light on the contrary – I realized that Fate simply does not exist. The vision of the past, shown by the medallion, revealed the truth to me. I came up with endless explanations, complex semantic constructions and theories, blamed my ignorance, but did not see the main thing - Fate is just an invention of the Sands. They manipulated me from the very beginning. Now I see their evil essence, although I do not fully understand it. Why should what reason gives us be something bad? Perhaps the consciousness, left to itself for a long time, dries up and rots through. And crumbles into lifeless dust. There is a lack of something that can balance it, and therefore the elements rage until it destroys itself and everyone around it. It's the same with fire or water. The elements are disunited, and therefore hostile and deadly. The same is true of man – he cannot live only what his mind dictates to him. He must also listen to the voice of his heart. But along with the spiritual life, we must not forget the bodily life – after all, he is a man, and not a bodiless spirit. Man is the vessel that absorbs all the elements and reconciles them. And if he prefers one thing, like Nergal Sands, he ceases to be human. But this does not happen by accident - he clearly knew what he was doing and what he was getting into. He wanted to soak in the Sands and become a part of it. He was already what I see him now, lacking only weapons and power. It turns out that the Sands, negative in nature, still take the form of the vessel into which they fall, and take on the features of their master. That's why they were so malleable when I interacted with them alone – I saw only good use for them. And my body did not accept such experiments. But as soon

as Nergal returned and came into contact with the Sands with his mind - and then his body - something irreversible happened. Now they are poison, the embodiment of evil and a formidable weapon. They were only insidiously waiting for the moment when they would meet someone who would allow their power to grow to the fullest. If you give them free rein, they will swallow the whole world! Which will then crumble to dust and cease to exist. And there will be only a pale echo of past eras, which are not destined to be repeated.

Well, now I'm even glad that my illusions are finally crumbling, one by one. These sensations are clearly not pleasant, but they are like a cure for an illness. And not the miraculous and instant cure that the Sands of Time gave me, but a very real, real one. ***Now I can resist anything, nothing will cloud my mind!***

Everything that has happened to me in recent years is just a series of coincidences. Fate is invented by the Sands, who want to control everything, to a single breath. This is the road by which they lead people to their own goal, only by pretending to be the source of infinite wisdom and omniscience. It all started with Masghik and, through the millennia, stretched to me. And, I confess, the power of the Sands is so great that it is really so difficult to change their plans that the deception becomes kind of true. An imposed truth, from which it is difficult to hide or escape. Many tried to get rid of them, to cover the Abyss with stones, but time overcame them all, which made the struggle just a stupid ritual, and the real knowledge was lost. And I myself was a tool in these hands and brought this false truth to people! But now the deception and delusions have come to an end.

Namtar's Diary, Entry 80

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Coming to his senses from the chase in prison, the Prince not only gave way to despair, but also pondered one strange thing - Dahaka was chasing him as if half-heartedly, as if something was holding him back. The prince often lost sight of him, the air was not too viscous and cold as it used to be. It could hardly be explained by habit - it is simply impossible to take this calmly. All composure receded when Dahaka was near. But, still, this time something was definitely wrong.

The answers to the questions that the Prince asked were literally under his nose. But he could neither see nor hear them. The ghost still could not declare himself to the Prince. And, moreover, he did not see the point in it - he would not be able to help him, save him from imminent death. He saw her with his own eyes. But even if he wanted to, he wouldn't be able to hold Dahaka back forever. So he

decided that he had to postpone this death one last time in order to save another life. The ghost, with Iman's help, planted the diary in Ajit's cell and, after briefly possessing Dahaka, only directed the Prince there. He did not pursue the goal of revealing new revelations to the Prince, he only led him to the goal by deception and cunning. First to the diary, and then to Ajit. The forgery he left in the cell had nothing to do with the truth - the Ghost only wanted to atone for his guilt before Ajit and save him. Even though the Maharaja's expedition was soon to arrive and do the same. But the Wraith's plans were far more far-reaching, hoping to change the prisoner's fate entirely, and help him never encounter the Sands of Time again. He had already suffered enough from them, paying in full for other people's mistakes.

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Ajit's face was hardly familiar to the Prince, for they had never met in Azad. Besides, he was much younger now. And this in itself interested the Prince much more - he did not even answer the prisoner when he introduced himself. He understood that he was facing a man who was most likely several thousand years old.

Without waiting for the Prince's reply, Ajit said:

"You're not the one I was waiting for.

He was clearly not very interested in who his savior was, and his cold, dry tone spoke of indifference to everything in general. There was a deep disappointment in his eyes, which could not be explained by surprise at his sudden release from many years of imprisonment. This feeling was ingrained in him, deeply ingrained in his mind. And it definitely did not fit in with his age in any way - facial features, figure and even voice - literally everything in him betrayed a very young young man. The prince could not even imagine how Ajita changed all the life experience that one day suddenly fell on his shoulders. He was immeasurably greater than anything the Prince had ever experienced.

"Who were you waiting for?" he asked.

"No one," Ajit replied with a sigh.

–But... how? Or rather, what do you mean? The Prince did not understand.

– It's hard to explain. But I don't want to. All this is a complete deception," the young man explained, although the Prince did not understand his interlocutor better. "I used to wait, but now I don't.

There was a pause, and Ajit, seeing the Prince's confusion, decided to say:

"Thank you for saving me. But how did you find me? People never come to this island to save anyone. Why are you here?

The prisoner's last question was filled with suspicion and the Prince hastened to dispel the doubts of his interlocutor:

–You are right. I came here for my own reasons. You can even say that it was not of her own free will. And I failed. But where my path ended, a new one opened up – I found a diary in which you left only a page. And, I will not hide, I decided to save you from imminent death, in the hope that you will save me from it," the Prince explained.

Ajit listened appraisingly to the Prince and nodded, looking away.

"Then you want to prolong life by avoiding death?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the Prince. "You're the only one who survived in this horrible place.

"But I didn't leave any notes," Ajit replied. "I don't know what you're talking about.

"But how do you explain this?" The Prince asked, handing Namtar's diary to the prisoner on the last page, "I found it in your cell, two thousand years after your death.

"It's a fake. Like the locket that hangs around your neck. You see, this whole place is one complete deception. And everything is not what it seems! Ajit blurted out.

The prince finally saw what exactly the prisoner was hiding behind his indifference - it was a deep-seated resentment. It is not known whether it is for someone specific or for the whole world as a whole. But the more he spoke, the more he became like an ordinary youth. However, he clearly knew something, and the Prince tried to find out more.

"In what...," he barely had time to open his mouth when Ajit interrupted him.

"You see, it doesn't matter what is written there and by whom. All this is one big lie. Do you think that the locket is definitely real, since it helped you travel two thousand years into the past? Well, once I was mistaken like you. But time has changed me.

"So there was no Namtar?" Is the medallion a simple trinket? The Prince asked incredulously.

"Hardly," Ajit said.

"But you contradict yourself," the Prince asked in bewilderment.

– No, not at all. The question is not whether the real thing is in your hands, but whether it was created for a real purpose. Or just to throw dust in the eyes? To create the illusion of truth, revelation? The prisoner replied with bitterness in his voice.

Ajit looked at the Prince as if he was guilty of something in front of him, so he did not immediately find what to answer.

"I think I understand what you're talking about. I've encountered something like this myself, and more than once," the Prince finally answered.

–Understand? For real? What can you know about deception? Ajit got excited. The resentment in his eyes burned brighter and brighter, and the Prince decided to soften him a little and win him over:

"Tell me your story," he said.

"But that's not what you came here for, is that?" And I have no reason to trust you! If the Empress really didn't send you to me, do you know what I'm going to tell you? Do you want to save your life? "Then please, come into my cell, and I'll lock the door behind you." Only in this way will you know the true value of things. And I've had enough! Ajit continued to get excited.

–Wait! The Prince pulled him a little angrily. "If you don't want to, you don't have to tell me anything. But there is nothing you can do about the fact that you are now free. And the Empress is dead!

Ajit, who was just about to say something else, stopped. He thought about something and half a minute later spoke again, this time in a much calmer tone.

"I knew Namtar – he really lived. But he is not at all who he pretended to be. He is a Guardian, just like Kaileena. He is the first, she is the last. And each of them contributed to this deception. For some reason, they used me, tricking me into this cell. It took me forever to understand their motives and never fully understood! Namtar was mired in squabbles with his son and was trying to carry out some insidious plan with my hands. He told me a lot of things, and some of them were true. But only to strengthen the deception.

The prince noticed that Ajit was cautious and chose his words, trying not to say anything superfluous. But he began to think that he knew almost nothing, only giving his own interpretation of what the Prince already knew. Meanwhile, Ajit continued:

"And he created the medallion in order to somehow harm his enemies. Namtar himself called it a fake, and the capabilities he possessed were only a distraction.

"What is your role in all this?" The Prince asked.

Ajit froze in place and looked at the Prince. The prisoner's eyes were bewildered. He didn't seem to know the answer...

"I spent a thousand years in this cell before you found me. And judging by what you've said, it would have been two more before I'd be free. Inside the cage, time stopped, and I was left alone with the silence and my own thoughts. They had been accumulating for years and did not want to leave my head. Every dream I had, every random thought, every sound, everything was imprinted in my memory. But I hardly need it. Do you know what it's like to be in complete silence

for years? At first, it seemed to me that all the problems were gone. But over time, I've gotten better at discerning details, and I must have gone mad if it weren't for those damned Sands that didn't give me freedom. Do you see? My body hasn't changed at all, and my mind has already aged several times and collapsed under its own weight. It turned out that development, maturation and wisdom are a temporary phenomenon. They are followed by decline. I'm a wreck who doesn't believe in anything," Ajit said in one breath, with a tear in his voice.

The prince could hear the pain in his voice. Now he was telling the truth, at least partially. The ordeal that fell to his lot was truly excruciating, and he came out of it undefeated. But it seems that he was really broken. And even more – he was not ready for this accidental release. He did not know what to do with his life, how to dispose of his newfound freedom.

"The keepers came to me; one followed another, but each tried to get something out of me. And none of them dared to let me go. The only thing in my power was not to let anyone in. You're the first to open this door in a thousand years. I don't know what you want, but you're not like the Guardians," Ajit continued.

"Did you really know something?" The Prince asked.

"Nothing that would be true. Only lies, skillful lies about the Sands. But now I am nobody. My memory is a funeral urn, where truth is inseparably mixed with fiction, where my own speculations cloud my mind. I'm sorry, I can't help you. It turns out that I have nothing more to do in this place if the last Guardian is dead," the prisoner muttered dejectedly. "And nothing I supposedly knew was confirmed, didn't come true, you know? Nothing, for a thousand years! And I even agreed to die, I dreamed of interrupting this endless nightmare...

It seemed to the prince that he felt in part the incredible burden that had fallen on the shoulders of the once young Ajit. He dived headlong into an unknown element, perhaps even wishing to, but he found himself in its captivity. And, instead of a lake with pleasantly cool and clear water, it turned out to be a muddy and dirty bottomless puddle, on the surface of which someone's false promises were reflected. However, his words did not really surprise the Prince - he had already become well convinced of the deceptiveness of these places and the fact that the Guardians could not be trusted (although he had met only one of them).

For a while, each of the interlocutors plunged into his own thoughts. Ajit tried to calm down after his emotional story and perhaps figure out what to do next. But, however, he hardly succeeded. The prince thought that they were similar in some ways. Despite the fact that the Prince has only been running from fate for

the past seven years, unlike Ajit, who was its prisoner for a thousand, he felt like he was looking at his own reflection. Ajit is himself in the future, exhausted and exhausted. And the maximum of his opportunities is to play with fate on an equal footing, using all his strength and skills just not to worsen his situation. However, looking at the prisoner, he doubted that he could emerge victorious from such a fight. One day, he will also get tired of everything and become like Ajit - you don't even have to wait that long. And fate, as if nothing had happened, will continue its race.

The prince was the first to break the silence, and it seemed that Ajit was even glad of it - the abyss of his own mind was dragging him to the bottom again.

"At the very beginning of the conversation, you said... Who were you waiting for? The Prince asked.

– The answer "no one" still applies. Namtar appeared to me in the form of a misty vision, a spirit. The Namtar I trusted, to whom I had given my destiny into my hands, he never existed. A phantom, a fiction, an empty delusion that I left behind many years ago, but, as you understand, I could not forget. Well, maybe now my memory will begin to fade? I just want to see it with my own eyes. I wish to see for myself that the last Guardian is dead.

The prince hoped that Ajit would still cheer up and tell him at least something useful. He felt that he had done a good deed in freeing the unfortunate prisoner, and if he had the opportunity, he would have helped him in some other way. But he doubted that it was possible. And even the opportunity to be convinced of the death of the Empress with his own eyes will only harm him. The lie will end, and he has long missed the truth, lost it in the fog of his own mind. Ajit hardly looked like someone who could help the Prince, and he had no clues at all.

The Prince was now fully aware that he was facing an even greater unknown, face to face with his true enemy, the Sands. He would gladly go back to the already familiar confrontation with Kaileena, which moved him forward at least a little, even if it happened in some non-obvious way, not thanks to, but in spite of.

I wonder what Ajit will say to the fact that the Prince would like to bring Kaileen back to life now? This was not without a certain meaning! Even if he did it only to kill her again, but in the present, only then would the Sands not be created, or at least never fall into the hands of the Maharajah, and he would finally be free. The prince felt inspired by the sudden idea - his plan seemed extremely simple to him. But was he really so?

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The ghost who had been watching Ajit all this time was simply discouraged by his behavior. He was not at all the man he remembered him from the events in Azad. Somewhat harsh, but purposeful and relentless. Now he saw before him a pitiful, weak-hearted man who was not ready to continue his life at all. It is amazing what a person who has nothing to believe in can turn into. And who is immensely, infinitely tired.

Standing in front of the Prince, Ajit could not express even a tenth of the feelings that raged in his soul. She screamed shrilly, furiously, but he restrained himself and outwardly held himself relatively straight, fearing that the Prince would not understand him. How could he understand it at all, feel the pain in his every word, if he had not gone through such an ordeal himself? After so many years, he didn't even know if he was a human at all. He became only a shadow, a semblance of him, who could still walk and breathe, but had no special will to do so. He moved only by inertia, falling into the abyss of his own despair.

Ajit was a man without a past, which had faded and blurred, and without a future, it made no sense to him, because everything was built on lies. He cannot return anything and build nothing again. And the death of the last Guardian did not bring him any special joy, but, on the contrary, put an end to his life. He was an unnecessary element in this time. However, it seems that he was not one in his era either. Someone's cruel joke forever crossed out the chances of living a normal life. And even the right to a dignified death. Now, at best, he could become a wanderer who runs aimlessly from himself, but is unable to find another, new personality. He desperately wished that someone would look into his eyes and see the bottomless abyss of his grief that had gnawed at his soul for centuries, turning it into dust. But it was simply impossible – feelings could not be shared. You can only help to test them. But it is unlikely that his savior was going to understand his emotional experiences so deeply, and therefore Ajit only followed him to the entrance to the fortress. Almost without any motive, just like a clockwork that had once been launched, which had managed to rust and get dirty with time, but for some reason it was still moving.

There was no one to take revenge on. In general, any action, in Ajit's opinion, no longer made sense. The once pleasant emptiness has turned into an unnecessary, useless freedom. Ajit wanted to return to his imprisonment - at least he was used to such suffering, and the new one was simply unbearable. Fate took possession of him completely.

Trying to make sense of everything, the Ghost stared through Ajit's thoughts, looking for an answer. But his mind was so clouded that nothing, none of the answers, none of the findings, were definite

and certain. His mind was clouded by the endless wanderings that only took place in his head, and the loss of all hope. Everything he had ever hoped for did not come true, did not happen, and turned into a lie. And the gone, lost time now had no meaning even for himself. And then the Ghost was distracted and looked at another version of events, one that he had no hand in. In it, Ajita saved Maharaj and at first he came out of the temporary prison exactly the same, but the whirlpool of events picked him up and carried him away, so that everything turned out completely differently.

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One ordinary day, the boundaries between which Ajit had long ceased to distinguish, he suddenly saw that something was happening in the hall in front of his cell. At first, the guards fussed, and then the unthinkable happened - the soldiers left their places for the first time in hundreds of years! They never returned, and after a while a man came to him who introduced himself as an Indian Maharajah. He was surrounded by a detachment of warriors and prisoners who had just been freed from the common prison.

As in the case of the Prince, Ajit did not immediately come out to him, feeling distrust and fear of the unknown. But after a few minutes, after a short conversation, skepticism and indifference got the better of Ajit. However, Maharaja persistently questioned the prisoner about his imprisonment. When their conversation reached the Keepers, the Maharaja began to inquire about the great and terrible Empress, whom he and his companions had not yet encountered, but knew of the inevitability of it.

"She is only the last of the Guardians," Ajit explained. "The one who created the Sands of Time. Among the past, there were far more powerful, greater, and more formidable Guardians.

The Maharaja listened attentively to the prisoner, but did not answer him, pondering the information he had received. Suddenly, a man who introduced himself as Amar, the vizier of Maharaja, joined the conversation, asking a question:

"What is the Sands of Time you're talking about?"

Ajit was in no hurry to reveal all the secrets and answered rather vaguely:

"They're all around. The sands are the source of its power and extraordinary destructive power. They dictate fate, every step of a person and carry incredible danger, especially to those who dared to challenge them. And they cannot be destroyed.

Ajit was a little disingenuous with his last sentence, because he knew that if the Island went completely under water, the Sands would not avoid death. But he himself did not believe in the feasibility

of this scenario, so his words could hardly be considered a lie. Rather, he was simply missing inconsequential details.

"You were talking about other Guardians. How did you learn about them while you were imprisoned? Maharaja asked.

"I saw each of them personally. They came to me on their own," Ajit replied, waiting for the next question. He was not long in coming:

"And how many of them were there?" Or rather, how many did you find? Maharaja asked.

– I find it difficult to answer, there are enough to forget many of them. But in the thousand years I've been imprisoned, I've seen a lot of them," Ajit replied.

–Thousand? Maharaja asked in surprise. A smile or even a grin appeared on his face. He and a few other people thought that the prisoner had lost his mind and was making up tall tales.

"That's right, I...," Ajit continued.

"Wait, is this also thanks to the Sands of Time you were talking about?" Amar interjected again. He was serious and seemed very interested. "Is that where their strength lies?"

–Yes. Time in my cell once stopped and I saw how the ages rushed by, century replaced by century, and instead of one Guardian came another," the prisoner answered.

"And all this time you have been confronting them?" Another person from Maharaja's entourage, who introduced himself as Zoroaster, intervened in the conversation. He seemed to believe Ajit's words, too, and at the same time felt sympathy for him and admired the strength of his spirit.

Then the prisoner told them his story, gradually lifting the veil of secrecy over the mysterious Sands of Time. He was still careful, but he saw Maharaj and his warriors as allies who would help him carry out his final plan, one that, unlike everything else, was true. He must be one – at least some shaky excuse for his excruciatingly long torture. And as he spoke, Ajit felt his strength returning, he felt the desire to live, even if only for the sake of the death of the last Guardian. To his great regret, the Maharaja arrived too late to prevent the creation of the Sands of Time. But he knew that what cannot be destroyed can be safely hidden. Here on the Isle of Sands, the Sands have never been, and never will be, out of reach of the madmen and braves who will be found at any time and who are sure to challenge this power by taking possession of it. The power and power that it promised attracted many, and Maharaja could easily be one of them. But Ajit had ideas for how he could convince him to reconsider his views and learn to stay away from them, keeping the world and the Sands from each other.

The first part of Ajit's plan was to assassinate the Empress. He knew perfectly well the structure of the fortress, many of its secrets

and secret passages. The Maharaja's detachment (which turned out to be much more numerous) entrenched itself in the prison, preparing for an offensive. Ajit warned what threats the warriors of Maharaja would face; he suggested the ways by which the detachment was to get into the throne room. The plan, in addition, included several ambushes and reserve detachments that could help at a critical moment, suddenly turning the tide of the battle. In the fortress, with the power of the Sands, the Empress was far more dangerous than even a few hundred of her warriors in the open area outside the fortress. And therefore careful preparation was simply necessary.

The only condition that Ajit put forward was that he himself would have to kill the Empress. He didn't know her name, but he would prefer not to use it anyway. Addressing a person by name changes the very attitude towards him. He did not want this in any way, he was driven by a thirst for revenge. After all, to some extent, she was responsible for all the crimes of the previous Guardians, since she continued their path. And only if he plunged his sword into her flesh would he feel at least something. Something that he would definitely believe and put an end to a long-term nightmare.

The Maharaja and his companions listened to Ajit and treated him with the greatest reverence and respect, despite his youth. Most of them understood who was really standing before them – the one who had not been broken by the centuries, who had withstood the blows of time, but had never been defeated. A man of the greatest will, a sage from an ancient era. He was something more than a man. The one who stepped over death found himself at a new stage of spiritual growth. Many, and especially Zoroaster, tirelessly questioned him about his long years in confinement. And he was not too interested in the impact of the Sands - everything was more or less clear with them, but rather how Ajit felt now. The one who had walked over eternity on a tightrope and, despite loneliness, the loss of loved ones, and the persuasion of the Guardians to give away secrets, still found himself on the opposite side of this abyss and still stood firmly on his feet, as determined as ever.

After killing the Empress, Ajit was about to release the Sands of Time. He didn't know exactly what it threatened, and his memories lied to him. Therefore, he prepared for each of the options. The simplest scenario was in which the Sands, disconnected from the Guardian, would simply dissipate and cease to exist. But this would be unlikely, and he considered the most realistic scenario in which the Sands, breaking free, would cause real chaos, turning people into monsters far more ferocious and dangerous than the guardians of the Island. And this would show Maharaja the magnitude of the danger that the Sands are fraught with and force him to change his attitude

towards the Sands. Ajit would use his dagger to reabsorb the Sands into the Clock. And then everything would return to its original form, people would regain their original form, and Maharaja would surely be able to convince the others and come up with a worthy solution to this problem.

Ajit deceived the Empress by offering to surrender to her and tell her everything he knew from Namtar. She knew that the prisoner had been freed by the enemy whose army had attacked the Island, but curiosity got the better of her, for Ajit began to lay out secrets one by one, without waiting for the Empress's consent. And at that moment the detachments of the Maharaja began an offensive. Ajit managed to tell the Empress that the medallion that Shadi once possessed—the Empress disposed of it after the creation of the Sands—was a fake. He had tricked it into possession of it and the dagger just a moment before the attack.

When the battle began, Ajit hid for a while and, seizing the moment, handed the medallion to Maharaja, but keeping the dagger with him. He then appeared at the right moment and killed the Empress. She died more like an ordinary person, vulnerable and mortal. Afterward, Ajit used his dagger and released the Sands. He did not know exactly what would happen next, but the consequences exceeded all his wildest expectations: the Sands literally broke free from the chain and caused chaos everywhere. The walls of the fortress shook and crumbled, people fled in terror, and through the holes in the ceilings they could see how the clouds swirled over the Island and a giant pillar of light rose to the sky. Ajit was immensely impressed by what had happened, plunging him into awe for a moment, though he felt something familiar in it all, something he had seen before. But soon he regained his composure and began to search for the Maharaja in the general turmoil, making his way through the crowds of monsters.

The ghost saw that behind the scenes of this plan, another one was being implemented. Amar somehow managed to find the staff of Nergal, and he resisted the destructive power of the Sands. The staff told him how to wield their power, although it did not allow him to do so. But he led him to knowledge - to the library of the Empress, where, among other books, the vizier found the very diary of Namtar. Amar had enough time to read it, and he went mad at the true power of the Sands. He realized that he needed to take possession of the dagger, but he did not dare to speak out openly against Maharaja when Ajit managed to repair the consequences of the destruction.

However, the path that Ajit and Maharaja had to travel before the Sands were once again imprisoned in the Clock was a flaw in the plan that Ajit had not counted on. He could not have imagined that all the lies that now, after his release, he sought to forget, would turn

out to be the absolute truth. It was extremely simple: Dahaka came for Ajit. He always comes for the one who discovers the Sands of Time. And Ajit, like the Prince, began his run from fate, which pushed him to the most important find - a true, real locket. And he led Ajit to another lie, which unexpectedly turned out to be true - the Mask of the Sand Spirit. With her help, Ajit prevented the discovery of the Sands, and the locket helped him pass on to Maharaja the knowledge of the dangers of the Sands and the adventures they had experienced side by side, but which he had inevitably forgotten.

The Maharaja was imbued with incredible trust and respect for Ajit. He esteemed him above his friends and servants. He became something like a brother to him. Ajit, fearing further persecution of Dahaka and realizing that his past life was over and he was no longer connected with the Island, asked Maharaja to allow him to join his party and go with him to India. He had never heard of this country before, and he had a lot to learn, including learning a completely unfamiliar, alien language. The Maharaja gladly accepted his request and honored him, glorifying him in front of his subjects, briefly recounting their adventures. He even offered Ajit one of the highest titles at court upon his return to his homeland. He politely declined such a generous offer, but agreed to become the commander of the city's guards: Maharaja had sworn to him to jealously protect the Sands from the rest of the world and from any encroachments from outside, and Ajit would proudly lead the palace guards. After all, he knew better than anyone how important it was to prevent the repetition of this whole story in any form. But Ajit hardly noticed the oddities in Amar's behavior and what he was hiding. The vizier's staff did not arouse much suspicion in him, simply because he had never seen it with his own eyes, and Namtar spoke about it only superficially.

Ajit sailed away with Maharaja from the Island and left his past behind. At last, time around him was once again moving in a normal rhythm, and his memory began to slowly free itself from painful, lingering memories. The only thing that somehow supported them was fame, which for some time preceded him. He was revered as a hero, although no one knew all the details of what happened, except for himself and Maharaja. Subsequently, the name Ajit became so firmly entrenched among Indians as a synonym for perseverance and heroism, becoming literally a household name, that it became a very common name and forever took root in India, although the very history of its origin was forgotten.

The Maharaja asked Ajit to keep the true locket secret, wishing not to know all that it contained. He trusted his friend immensely and knew that he would easily endure such an ordeal. Maharaja hid his watch and dagger in his treasury, which from then on was guarded

day and night by a reinforced guard. And the fake medallion was worn by the Maharaja himself, knowing that it did not pose a particular danger to him and, if anything, it would serve as protection from the Sands. Many years later, he decided to give it to his daughter, Farah, hoping to keep her safe if anything did happen.

Since then, Ajit has hardly remembered Dahak - fate, embodied in a terrible beast, seems to have ceased to haunt him and did not manifest itself in any way before the events in Azad. Ajit believed that it was very difficult for Dahaka to find him, and this circumstance allowed him to live for many years in peace and quiet. Perhaps the true locket somehow helped Ajit in this, but nothing could last forever. At times, he feared that the monster would never stop his chase and one day find him. This is what happened in Azad, where the Ghost and Jatta will have to rescue him. However, even Ajit's death was still unusual, contrary to all plans of fate. He once again justified the name given to him.

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The ghost was at a point in time when none of the above events had yet happened, and Ajit was not yet bound hand and foot by fate. Thanks to the Ghost's intervention, he was free, although he did not really want to.

The next point of the Ghost's plan was to replace the Prince with Ajit - the former was doomed and thought only about saving his own life. But the Ghost was surprised and extremely depressed by the apathy and weak-willedness of the second. Until the Ghost studied a different version of events, with the rescue of Ajit Maharajah, it looked like the Prince could achieve at least some success in the fight against the Sands without even being too eager to do so. Ajit was barely able, figuratively speaking, just to stand still. The ghost needed to push Ajit, to make him cheer up, to find the strength to act again, just as he had in the other future. And then the Ghost came up with an unusual, but the only right decision. He decided to use the opportunity to control Dahaku for the first time, not to help the Prince, but to kill him. It would happen sooner or later, but it would make the right impression on Ajit. It will be like an awakening for him, a real, true one. A breath of fresh air after a stuffy and musty dungeon. Although his real prison was his own mind. It was the Ghost who was going to free him at last.

The Prince and Ajit walked through the Central Hall, heading towards the place where the Empress had died. Both were silent almost all the way away from the prison: the Prince was at a loss as to what to do next - after all, he no longer counted on the help of his companion, and Ajit looked around uncomprehendingly - he could not

recover from such a long imprisonment. Only when he was at the entrance to the throne room, Ajit noticed something that interested him - the silhouette of the Hourglass glowed faintly in the distance. And just as he began to peer into the distance, something completely unexpected happened to him: Dahaka appeared in front of them.

The monster looked exactly as it had been described, so Ajit, despite his blurred memories, immediately knew who was in front of him. The beast, led by the Wraith, looked at him and headed for the Prince, but Ajit's consciousness awoke and changed in an instant. He drew the sword he had picked up earlier on the advice of the Prince at the Watchtower and rushed into the fray. Dahaka threw him aside, about to finish what he started, but the Ghost did not calculate the force of the blow and Ajit flew several meters, hitting the wall hard. He lost consciousness and dropped the sword from his hands.

Dahaka froze in place - the Prince decided that the beast had come for Ajit, and he himself was safe, and rushed to his wounded companion. He was bleeding - the blow was too strong and it seemed that he accidentally injured himself with his sword. The prince tried to bring his companion to his senses, fearing that he had already died. But after a while, he opened his eyes and smiled for some reason.

–How are you doing? Did he come for you? The Prince said, constantly looking back at the beast.

"If he's here because of Ajit, why is he inactive?" he thought.

But the Prince immediately found the answer to his question - Ajit, trying to say something, coughed up blood and smiled again. He was dying, and apparently the monster was just watching. It all looked very strange to the Prince, but a new storm was raging in Ajit's heart.

"I've spent forever drawing the wrong conclusions!" he thought. "But then it was all true? Everything Namtar told me? But why then did he cheat and leave me forever?"

Ajit knew that he had only a few seconds to live. Then he gathered all his strength and answered the Prince, who had been shaking him all this time:

–Free... Sands...," he wheezed, smiling once more, after which his body went limp and he fell on top of the Prince sitting in front of him.

Ajit died knowing that there was someone who could continue his struggle. He died after seeing that his life was not a lie, even if the truth turned out to be fatal to him. But he knew, even if he had not believed it for a long time, that fate would overtake him one day. For using the Sands, he cheated death and lived a thousand years, instead of the time allotted to him.

The Prince, realizing that his companion was already dead, hurried away in the direction of the Clock, away from Dahaka, who, although still standing motionless, still caused genuine anxiety and fear in the Prince.

The ghost was in a daze with Dahaka. Or rather, on the contrary, this explained the immobility of the animal. Something had happened that was not at all part of the Phantom's plans: he had accidentally killed, albeit by proxy, the only hope. Ajit, who carried the spirit of struggle through the centuries, albeit rather tarnished, was eventually awakened only to really fall asleep. In some incomprehensible way, fate had achieved its goal again. His death is a hard lesson for the Ghost, the essence of which is that even he is not omnipotent, with all his abilities and skills. And, fearing even greater failure, he realized to his regret that there was no point in making another attempt: the main goal of his plan turned out to be impossible, and blindly chasing it, he could spoil something else. For example, to prevent Iman and the crew from escaping and sailing away from the Island.

And then the Ghost had to learn one of the main lessons: to see the depth of emptiness. Ajit, who barely reminded him of a human, had an incredible amount to tell with his desolate silence. The scorched earth in his soul is not only a cemetery of memories, it is also a lot of traces left by time. And from them it was possible to read events, other people's thoughts and actions. From the bits, the smallest irregularities, the outlines of something huge, incomprehensibly large even for the Ghost, could be guessed. This time, the reflections were much larger than the footprints themselves, but the Ghost now saw what added to the emptiness in Ajit's soul to the full picture. He read it like an open book, despite the fact that the pages had been torn out or burned.

The ghost realized that in some way (albeit not in the best way) he had corrected a completely different, much older mistake. Namtar treated Ajit with reckless cruelty, even though he was pursuing a good goal. It's time to put an end to it, once and for all. And the smile on Ajit's face only said that he had died happy, as strange as it sounded. And if the Ghost had not granted Ajit the desired deliverance from torment, it is not known how his meeting with the Prince would have ended. Most likely, it would result in a confrontation that would overshadow this goal, and would lead both of them astray. Therefore, the time has come, and fate has made its choice. The ghost knew that he himself was free from her whims, but he forgot that all those whom he tried to help still depended on her.

All traces led to the distant past. It seems that even knowing all about the origin of the medallion and Namtar's discovery and study of the Sands, the Ghost did not pay enough attention to it himself. At

first, he evaluated Namtar as a person who had made a huge mistake, but realized it too late. But now he realized that he was not so simple at all. Why did he leave behind Ajit? After all, he always believed that it is not a specific person that is important, but the goal itself. It turns out that he still did not understand the true purpose of Namtar and underestimated the scale of his plans?

The ghost wondered if even an ally thought something was a lie, then an enemy even more so - wasn't this the perfect way to hide something? Something bigger, incredibly valuable and almost unattainable? He had already seen from the example of the Mask and the medallion that Namtar created special caches that were incredibly difficult to find. Perhaps it is impossible at all, unless one knows about them for certain. And Ajit must have known, but being at the point of death, he would not have had time to tell the Prince everything he knew, and gave only one clue, the only one that had a chance of success. Only it could start the necessary chain of events. Except that Ajit didn't know that the Prince had already released the Sands once.

The ghost could easily go back in time and study Ajit better in that rare and brief moment of enlightenment when he seemed to have rediscovered himself. It would not be difficult for him to immerse himself in his mind and find many necessary answers. But he chose a different path, deciding to return to the original source: the source of all events was Namtar. And, perhaps, it was important not only what he wanted to hide, but also what he wanted to capture. Those torn pages from the end of his diary could tell something important, and the Ghost had to find a moment in time when they still existed. The inconvenient truths they were hiding might have made him take a fresh look at both Namtar himself and the events he was the epicenter of.

The ghost left Dahaka and left, leaving the events to chance. He restrained the beast all the time that the Prince was moving into the prison to rescue the prisoner. But as it turned out, it was completely in vain. And nothing mattered more without the right knowledge. Meanwhile, the Prince, who was already in the throne room, heard the roar of the monster behind him and realized that he had to run as fast as he could again - the beast had dealt with one victim and was now about to take on another.

Chapter 26. The Great Transfiguration

It's not enough to just fight the Sands, when I'm alone, I'll fade into oblivion, and the memory of me and my deeds will fade into the darkness of eternity. I have to find some way to challenge her and keep true knowledge. I need to leave the Message. The entries in this journal are not enough, he will simply destroy it if he finds it. Nergal will simply erase me from the history of the Island. I must create something indestructible, Eternal. For example, he would definitely be annoyed by my statue, made of a special material that cannot be destroyed. With the help of the Sands, I could completely stop the passage of time for her, turning her into a monolith, with the truth carved into it. Any touch will allow anyone to read my message as long as they want. And then the struggle will continue. ***But will he cope? If he is caught, it will be over!***

In the meantime, I found out what Nergal was up to. As I once suspected, he seeks eternal life. He wants to transform himself into a creature almost devoid of human form. It will be immortal, it will become like a deity. I don't know what exactly he wants to get, but he is blinded by this idea and is unable to see or hear the truth. It seems that I repeat this too often and it is time for me to come to terms with reality. And I have no choice but to strike a decisive blow - I will kill Nergal with my own hands.

Over time, I discovered that the dagger was able to concentrate the master's will and transmit it to the Sand. In some ways, it was even superior to a medallion – it could literally change the properties of Sand and how it affects a person and their consciousness. With it, I could control the Sands inside the Hourglass. A dagger is much more than a key. This is a finger that commands a great, albeit terrible, power. With its help, I can unleash the elements so that it seems to break free from the chain and wreak havoc everywhere, or, on the contrary, I can pacify it forever by sealing it and burying it in a vessel. And it is with it that I am going to kill Nergal. The dagger will absorb all the Sand from his body and drain him of his powers. This is my last chance. Time is short, Nergal has already begun preparations, but I must plan everything carefully. This creature, Zervan, as he calls him, will be invincible if I miss the moment.

Namtar's Diary, Entry 83

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Many people really began to believe that Namtar had gone mad - instead of fighting the enemy, he was thinking about some completely inappropriate things. He ordered his statue to be cast in

full growth from metal, which was to be used for new swords. But by this time he had lost almost all his allies, and this strange whim frightened the latter. Namtar's vanity surprised people on both sides. And ultimately, the statue was never created. But Namtar immediately set about creating some kind of giant Hourglass, despite all his claims about the evil imprisoned in the Sands. His deeds contradicted his words, his teachings.

However, Namtar was not mad at all, he was not mad. He was only looking for a way out, but he was frightened. For a long time, he convinced everyone that he knew what he was doing. In fact, he was not ready for a confrontation with his own son. At first, Namtar did not even fully understand the magnitude of the danger that Nergal's deeds posed to the Island. At night, he slept poorly and seemed to withdraw into himself, and during the day he could sit for hours and look at one point. And he continued to write his diary little by little, although no one understood why. He was only trying to find a way to retake the Sands. To separate them from Nergal's influence and imprison them in some object without the possibility of a way out would deprive his enemy of his power. But to do this, he needed to find strength in himself.

Namtar felt that he was missing something important. Time was slipping away from him like sand through his fingers, it was passing faster and faster, and nothing could slow him down. Everything happened in a different way, contrary to the original plans and ideas. Fast and assertive. He was no longer in control.

Perhaps it was not even fear that possessed Namtar. In his eyes, one could read, rather, a deep unspoken sadness. And although he did not show it, he discovered new feelings in himself, once hidden and repressed. He was used to ignoring them, turning them into long, lengthy thoughts and shapeless dreams in his diary. But now Namtar felt that a new feeling had settled in his heart, which he could no longer restrain, and it sometimes took possession of him, preventing him from thinking clearly. He grieved for the time when he could still stop Nergal, show him his love, and protect him from the Sands and from a dangerous adventure. He felt guilty of everything. Namtar even found it difficult to answer who was his greatest enemy - Nergal or himself? Everything he believed in and created, all his discoveries and ideas turned out to be a fatal delusion. And most of all, he was tormented by the fact that other people suffer because of his mistake. If he managed to fall asleep, he often woke up, and his body seemed to burn with heat. But when he woke up, he could not move for a long time. He felt paralyzed, had great difficulty breathing, and it took him great effort to keep fighting over and over again. The Hourglass was his last hope - he discarded almost all other options for fighting. But he felt that the Sand, leaving his mind, was taking all his strength.

Both body and spirit. This was the insidious nature of the Sands - they gave energy only to those who were interesting to them.

Namtar felt as if his mind had been emptied. Thoughts have turned from once mobile and bright to dull and slow. Now, only occasional faint flashes illuminated the darkness in his mind. And only the dull beats of his heart were heard in this emptiness - now it led him in the darkness somewhere there, to his last dream. Namtar was ready to sacrifice it - if only to correct his mistakes. He was even willing to let the Sands back into his mind, but he feared that there would be no turning back, they would either kill him or subdue him. But he refused to rely on intuition either. Trust mere chance? No! Namtar came to the conclusion that the enemy could only be defeated with his weapons.

The decision came to him by chance, on one of those sleepless nights, when the minutes dragged on for hours, frozen like shadows in the dim light of the stars. He felt cut off from the world, but in those moments of silence, he felt like he was safe. And he wanted to prolong this feeling, to make it almost eternal. In this, insomnia helped him a lot - he managed to feel literally every second that it was biting into him like ...

"A dagger!" exclaimed Namtar in his mind.

The idea flashed in him suddenly, blinding his mind with a bright flash. How did he not guess earlier? A dagger is not only a key! This is a weapon that he will be able to use in a fight with Nergal. Namtar has grasped the essence of empowering objects with the power of the Sands - once they are soaked, they gain the ability to act independently. Yes, the Sands will reach for objects, as it was with the medallion, but inside them there will be a part of the Sands, as if cut off from the general mass. And he can control it without fear of Nergal's influence. He can construct the abilities that Sand will have in this item.

Namtar already had a different view of fate and the flow of time. He saw them as a set of memories, once experienced events. And time travel turned into immersion in these memories - it does not matter whether they are your own or someone else's. It was this property that he endowed the dagger with - it helped it return for a few seconds to the past, before something irreparable happened. And he used the mutual pull of the dagger and the Sand to get rid of the monsters of Nergal - the blade literally pulled all the Sand out of them, turning them into clouds of dust. Namtar intended to defeat his enemy in this way, either by destroying him if the Transfiguration went too far, or simply by powering him and capturing him.

This dagger is exactly what Nergal will want the most! Therefore, he will come to Namtar himself. Taking the dagger in his hands for the first time, he felt a pleasant chill and a slightly

forgotten feeling - ideas began to flare up in his mind again, one after another, new thoughts began to be born. It seems that he has indeed found a way to tame the Sands - to divide them into parts unrelated to the main one, and isolate them in various objects. And, therefore, his idea with the Clock was also correct! What a pity that he did not have time to bring this idea to the end and gave Nergal almost a dummy.

Now he understood the mechanism of the mirror bowls better - he created them unconsciously, almost blindly, and Nergal only slightly changed them. Reflections of the human soul were visible in them, but they seemed to be compressed in time, not momentary. They showed the future – inevitable death, illness or decay of consciousness. And these reflections seemed to change places, turning a person into a monster and tearing the soul out of his body. But the conversion was almost instantaneous only if a person touched the Sand in the bowl and immersed his hands or face in it. Nergal began to change people unnoticed by them, gradually transforming them, gradually soaking their bodies with the Sands. And together with them, he slipped them his lies, which created some kind of new reality, where Namtar was the universal enemy, and not him.

It seemed strange to Nergal that the Sands had no effect on Namtar himself. He had spent so much time with them, but he hadn't changed a bit, he was only a little dazzled by their incredible capabilities and power, but nothing more. And Nergal came to the conclusion that there was something special about Namtar, which could even be dangerous for him if he did not use this mysterious power against Namtar himself in time. She is like a sleeping beast that will wake up and sweep away everything in its path if it is angered enough. And not only will it not pass by Namtar, it will destroy him in the first place. His personality and his consciousness.

As Namtar had hoped, the dagger quickly caught Nergal's attention. But he was not afraid of him, although with his help Namtar did manage to achieve some success - his troops were much easier to cope with the sand soldiers of Nergal when Namtar participated in the fight with his dagger. But Nergal was driven more by curiosity - he looked at what he was capable of. He had a hard time admitting to himself that Namtar had a really good and inventive imagination, so Nergal still had a lot to learn from him. He could only use these achievements, but he could hardly create on his own. Maybe, only partially. But he was not a "dreamy fool," as he called his father, and he recognized a serious threat in time. And he rebuilt the Sands in such a way that Namtar could not create at least one more such dagger. If everyone in his squad had it, then he would even have a ghostly, but chances to win this confrontation. And Nergal could not allow this. And, at the same time, he understood

that such restrictions only stimulated Namtar to new ideas, more and more unusual and useful.

What Nergal appreciated most about Namtar's discoveries was that he himself had long been unaware of their power. The Hourglass really turned out to be the crowning achievement of his creation, although he himself did not understand what he had created. He considered his work unfinished, suitable only for distraction. But it had a huge hidden potential - so much Sand collected in one place turned it into something more powerful than the Abyss itself. Their power was concentrated in almost one point and was simply incredible. And at the same time, it is very fragile, literally one step away from disaster - if you let the Sands out, the consequences will be devastating and will kill almost anyone. Maybe only a dagger or a medallion will protect a person nearby. And also a staff. But the rest will have a hard time - it will not be a slow transformation, when the Sands flow into a person for months, but an instant transformation into a monster, into a living dead. Nergal was very angry with Namtar for creating the Clock in this form, with this flaw. But there was nothing he could do about it - releasing the Sands to imprison them in another, safer vessel was very dangerous. Therefore, he was going to elevate this act to the rank of absolutely unacceptable.

Nergal presented the Clock as his own achievement. He said that with their help he would be able to reverse the infection of people and heal them, saving them from the plague of Namtar. And the people who came to him for these rituals really changed for the better – the Sand partially left their bodies, their consciousness became lighter and freer. But this did not last long - Nergal returned them to their original state imperceptibly for them, gradually. And he himself only studied the interaction of the Sands in the human body and in the Clock. He used humans as vessels and gradually filled the Hours with more and more Sands.

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For a very long time, Namtar did not suspect that Nergal had learned to read his thoughts and, sometimes, secretly peeped through them into his diary - thoughts written down on paper were always clearer and more accessible, better remembered and understood by Nergal. Thanks to this, he was always a few steps ahead of Namtar. There was no real confrontation - Nergal won this war even before it began. He was only playing for time, watching Namtar's ingenuity, knowing that when cornered, he was capable of incredible ideas. Necessity might have helped him to make new discoveries that would be of great use to Nergal. After all, he himself achieved almost nothing, he stole all the ideas and skills from his

father. He was only preparing for something, seeing the future of the Island very differently from Namtar. And he waited for him to come to the realization of his defeat and his humble acceptance. And the despair that follows.

The wait did not last long. Having lost almost three-quarters of his force - they died or left of their own free will - Namtar decided to take extreme measures: he decided to go against Nergal in open battle. By this time, he had already managed to overcome his indecision, he was almost not stopped by the family connection between him and Nergal. He learned of all the horrors that were happening on the outer island and decided to put an end to it all. He prepared and chose the moment when unrest began on Usakara - Zulu was deprived of a sense of proportion and literally forced the people to go against him. Almost half of Nergal's soldiers were deployed to suppress the rebellions, and he himself was distracted by the general turmoil that interrupted his preparations for the Transfiguration. Namtar decided that he would not have a better moment and sneaked into the throne room, where Nergal stood in front of a huge hourglass, brandishing his staff. He hoped to take him by surprise - there was no one else in the hall.

But Nergal, without turning, suddenly said:

"Hello, father. I have been waiting for this meeting for a long time.

"Turn around when you're talking to me!" Namtar objected, not at a loss. "How do you have the audacity to answer me in such a tone?"

Nergal turned, and the smile Namtaru hated was on his face again. Cold, cruel and merciless, like the edge of a sword. Orange lights burned in his eyes, it seemed that they had become brighter since their last meeting.

Nergal turned and said nothing, staring at his father, knowing that it would make him angry. He only spread his hands in a gesture that showed that he considered himself the rightful owner of this place and, slightly clutching the staff in his right hand, slammed it on the floor. A lot of soldiers appeared around him. It was the first time Namtar had seen them like this, with almost nothing human left in them.

At that moment, people from Namtar's squad burst into the hall and a battle began between them and the sand warriors. He himself continued to curse Nergal:

"You'll only be remembered as Nergal the Destroyer!" The one who did not create anything himself and only destroyed everything that was created by others with such difficulty. But your castle is built of sand and one day it will collapse!

"Enough empty threats," Nergal replied calmly. "Look around, am I only bringing destruction?" I admit that sometimes it is very difficult to accept changes. But you're either with me and them, or you're going to be history. Forgotten history.

At these words, Nergal's eyes sparkled orange again. Namtar already knew what kind of change Nergal had in mind. And what exactly he wanted to do with himself. Now all his worst fears have been confirmed. One small flash was proof of all the rumors and suspicions. It contained everything - Nergal's desire to finally merge his body with the Sands and establish his absolute power over the Isle in the form of a deity who controls the powerful element. His body would have become this element. After all, it is no coincidence that he experimented on people for so long and persistently, depriving them of their soul and human appearance. He studied how the Sands affected them and prepared for the transformation himself. But it had to be different – he too would lose his appearance, but he would not become an obedient slave. He wanted to become the master of Peski.

"You're a monster. I regret that I gave birth to you. You are not my son, I renounce you! Namtar answered. He wanted to say something more important and substantial, but he was worried despite the fact that he had a secret plan. In his eyes, he made this attempt to attack not so desperate. Rather belated, but not hopeless yet.

Nergal, on the other hand, remained calm as he answered:

"As I said once, you're blind. An eternity stretches out at your feet, and you look only into tomorrow. People are born and die – it has always been like this, and what is the point of grieving because of this? Why be a human at all? This world is more than just a splash in the ocean of timelessness. But you need to throw everything away and change yourself in order to know it. A person has learned to be aware of himself – this has transformed him ideologically. But, this is only the first part of a long journey. When he learns to transform himself, it will be a second revolution. True. And then a person will truly be the master of his life.

Nergal did not expect to win Namtar over to his side. He knew that his father was stubborn and would never reconcile himself to his ideas and methods. It only distracted and confused him, as always. So, having finished his words, he strode towards Namtar, banging his staff menacingly on the floor. After a few steps, he started running. This took Namtar by surprise, as he was going to attack himself. But instead of striking a blow, Nergal took advantage of his enemy's hesitation, turning sharply to the side, rounding his father and running towards the exit of the hall.

"Stop, coward!" Namtar shouted after him, a little confused.

"You've always just caught up with me!" Try again! Nergal blurted out as he ran, flashing his vile smile for a second.

Namtar had no choice but to rush after his son. But Nergal did not flee out of fear of his father. He only wanted to distract him, to take him away from the Clock. They were vulnerable, not he himself. And Namtar was incredibly close to understanding this and to the Clock itself. It was enough just to open them and release the Sands. And then the balance of power would change radically.

Running to the middle of the Central Hall, Nergal stopped, pretending to be exhausted. It was actually an invitation to battle.

"Do you think I'll be ashamed, I'll regret and apologize for something?" There is only the goal I am moving towards and the obstacles on my way that I have to remove! Nergal said with undisguised contempt.

Namtar began to realize that his son was manipulating him and tried to calm down. But a fight was inevitable, and he decided not to wait for any other surprises from Nergal. He was unarmed and fought back only with a staff. Namtar held a sword in his hands, not wanting to draw his dagger ahead of time and betray his plan.

"I don't need you anymore, you've done everything you could. But without me, there will be nothing! Nergal continued to provoke his father.

– Do you think it's normal when people die? But not you? Namtar blurted out.

"What makes you think I'm afraid of death?" Nergal replied.

Namtar had not expected to hear quite such an answer. He thought that Nergal would start making up tall tales, dodging and lying again. But those words showed how much he really believed in what he was doing. Nergal is even ready to die for it, but only after completing his work. A mission, as he himself imagined it. But then why does he need this Transfiguration, which he talks about, if he does not care about his life? Or does he consider this life to be over and is already preparing for a new one, in a different body and with a different consciousness? Namtar had to admit that he could not comprehend the full magnitude and complexity of Nergal's plan. In this he surpassed him. And at the same time, Namtar blamed himself for having created Nergal the way he was now. All responsibility for what was happening lay with him. And Nergal only skillfully used this feeling of guilt of a father for his son.

Namtar was not a skilled warrior - battle was never his lot. He had chosen the path of knowledge and wisdom, but now he had to defend himself and his home willy-nilly. Nergal had succeeded in waging war, but now he was unarmed and defended himself with his staff, repelling his father's blows one after another. He had nowhere to retreat - Namtar brought down the stairs of Sand that led to the

passages to the Garden and the Mechanical Tower. And he sealed the door to the exit from the fortress. It seems that he managed to trap Nergal.

He defended himself as best he could, hiding behind pillars, brandishing his staff, and looking for a way to escape. Namtar knew that this could not last forever and sought to corner him - even though there were none. To carry out the last point of the plan, he had only to disarm Nergal.

"Haven't the timeline and Fate itself convinced you of anything?" Is it that I am doing the right thing? Nergal asked him.

"You never believed in fate!" Namtar answered. "So why are you sending me to her now?"

"I needed this deception!" If I lied to you, I could use her power as I pleased. Oh, how much it can give me! Nergal replied triumphantly.

Namtar took advantage of the enemy's momentary weakness and, instead of another blow with his sword, which he was ready to parry, pushed Nergal with all his might - he flew backwards and fell to the floor, hitting his head. The staff flew to the side and Namtar rushed to the fallen enemy. He bent over him, raised his sword, ready to strike and end this shame. As he expected, his son tried to feign remorse, asking for pity on him:

"Father...," Nergal wheezed, blade to his throat.

Namtar looked into his eyes and, sighing, said:

–I... I will not be able to kill my own son, even after what you have done," Namtar said, lowering his sword. This pretense was the last part of his plan, which made him disgusted. His soul strongly opposed such methods, which Nergal usually used. But his hand slipped imperceptibly to the belt where the dagger was hidden. He pretended to be a weakness that Nergal expected from him most in order to distract and deal with him with a secret weapon.

The last thing Namtar remembered clearly was Nergal's hateful and predatory smile. The world around him darkened and collapsed. Silence rang in his ears, which hid the contemptuous laughter of the triumphant enemy. The emptiness absorbed Namtar and filled his body with unbearable pain - the wound in the chest instantly made itself felt. It felt like an eternity had passed, but in reality, it was only a few seconds. The last corner of his mind caught on to the saving idea of using the dagger to go back in time a few moments. But Nergal knew about this in advance. He knew all about the dagger and Namtar's ruse, but he allowed him to believe that he had fallen for it. Deception within deception. As if he caught the moment and the slight falsity in his father's words, he grabbed his hand with a dagger and plunged it into his heart.

The wound did not kill Namtar instantly, and he still quite consciously tried to use the special power of the dagger. And this was his main mistake - this is what Nergal was counting on. His touch changed the sand inside the dagger, and Nergal's will was transmitted to him. And instead of death, the blade brought Namtar something else. Something that flooded his body with cold and pain that penetrated into every corner of his body and mind. He no longer felt alive, but he continued to move, wriggling on the floor in agony.

Nergal walked up to him and, bending down slightly, said:

"You're just a tool. A small part of the huge mechanism that has done its job, has served and will now be thrown away forever! Did you think I didn't know anything?

Namtar couldn't even say anything in response, he only wheezed incoherently in response. He did not hear Nergal's words, but rather felt, guessed what he might have said. As he reached out to retrieve the dagger, Namtar suddenly regained consciousness for a moment and threw Nergal aside. He staggered back, but did not fall. Having recovered a little, he said angrily:

"You're gone!" And I will become what you did not have the courage to become. May the Great Transfiguration take place!

Screaming in pain, Namtar fled. The walls of the hall around him, the corridors and the people merged into one indistinct stream, swirling into a whirlpool, into the center of which he was carried away faster and faster with every second. Fighting with himself – the Sand instantly melted all over his body and literally tore him apart – Namtar shouted only one thing:

"Follow me!"

He didn't want the rest of his band to suffer the same fate as him. His fate had already been sealed - he would become another of the countless monsters in Nergal's army. It seemed to him that his consciousness was about to be torn out of his own body, his legs and arms did not obey, and he miraculously did not fall immobilized. It seemed that another second and he would crumble into dust and really cease to exist. It's hard to say what kept him on his feet and conscious, but he rushed to an old passage in the rocks that led to the abandoned caverns in the northern part of the Island. Almost no one used this road - only for the removal of garbage. It was squeezed on both sides by sheer cliffs, which, in Namtar's wounded mind, stretched into two endless walls and it seemed to him that he was forever doomed to run along them without a chance of escape and rest.

Nergal did not even think of rushing after Namtar and his men in pursuit. He sent his soldiers to intercept them in the middle of the road, waiting for them on one of the bridges overhanging the passage and trying to catch them off guard, as they would think they had

broken away from the pursuit. Most of the people were captured or killed, only Namtar managed to escape. He was incredibly tormented by this, he lamented, forgetting about his own suffering. And Nergal knew that this was exactly what would happen - he specifically ordered not to touch Namtar. What is left of it.

An hour later, Zulu arrived on the Island. He found Nergal and reported to him:

"The rebellion has been suppressed, my lord.

"Very well, Executor of Zulu!" Now we need to find Jatta as quickly as possible and take the locket from her - it hangs on her collar," Nergal replied.

At this time, Namtar called on Jatta to return as soon as possible with the medallion from Osakar. He hoped that it would help him heal, as it had already happened once. The dagger will no longer help him - it can only kill him by absorbing the Sand. But what can kill Nergal now? Or rather, what it will become.

Chapter 27. A real medallion

My plans were completely ruined. Now, for the first time, I clearly understand that I will not win this confrontation. During our fight, Nergal turned my weapon against me and stabbed me with a dagger! With my own hand! And trying to go back a few moments to the past, before the injury, only exacerbated the problem - the sand from the dagger rushed into my body and began to devour it. To be honest, I expected to die almost instantly, or to become one of his monsters, the most ordinary soldier in his army, a shameful fate for me. But from the look in Nergal's gaze, I understood that even in murder he was not so easy! All this was part of his plans, right down to the very dagger strike. And he himself had no intention of becoming any deity. He only made me think so. And now he was tormenting me with a slow and painful transformation into a monster. I am already writing these lines with great difficulty, feeling my mind torn apart with pain, and the Sands are trying to completely bend it to their will. Every now and then I have strange visions in which I am going somewhere, but my body does not belong to me. I am a voiceless prisoner imprisoned in the body of a monster. And eternity is my main torture.

Nergal used my every idea against me! Literally everything - the Sands themselves, mirrors, time portals, a dagger, my faith in Fate and my father's love for it. He manipulated the Sands as he pleased, turning their power against me. It was he who put Sand into the dagger with a special ability, not to kill, but to turn me into the complete opposite. All my mistakes and delusions will come to life in this monster. I will only kill, I will lose all human traits.

I have no doubt that soon he will find a way to get his hands on the dagger, and then he will be able to control the Hourglass, sealing it away forever. Anyone who tries to unleash their power will face unconditional death - he will overtake and destroy anyone. Dahaka, the guardian of time, the tame beast of Nergal and the living embodiment of Fate. The clock will keep the timeline, allowing Fate to dictate every step of future generations. And this order cannot be violated.

From the very beginning, I had no chance - Nergal had full access to time travel. This is an incredibly valuable and useful resource that I underestimated due to the fact that it did not give me the desired result the first time. And it turned out that Nergal opposed me with all the wisdom and cunning cunning of the Sands. With such opportunities, he would have outplayed me in any case, even at the expense of the number of attempts. But it seems that he surpassed me in everything. I fought with Fate and it seems that I lost completely. All this time, I was only walking towards the end

point, which was already prepared in advance. And being in it, it seems to me that I always knew what was going to happen. He literally felt it, but refused to believe it. The future also affects us, like a reflection that whispers something in a dream.

Deception is his strong point. Sands can create almost any illusion. It turned out that half of his army was an empty mirage, which he created, with the help of a staff getting into someone else's mind. The sand showed him great power, but did not allow him to use it. He needs a medallion or a dagger to put an end to this war. They are not an illusion, they are the key.

It's sad to admit, but my idea with the statue was incredibly stupid and even ridiculous. I was presumptuous, I thought I was one step away from victory, and that's why I allowed myself such strange and even ridiculous ideas. I think I thought it was a little amusing myself—I succumbed to the weakness of contempt for my opponent. I taunted him at the very moment when he was setting the last traps around me.

I feel my consciousness melt and my body burn with fire, losing the battle to something that is already deep inside me. I remember my illness that almost killed me shortly before I met the Sands of Time - the sensations were very similar. And in the last, desperate hope, I called Jatta back to me to take the locket from her and try to ward off the disease, to heal again. But in vain, he must have foreseen this. I have the locket with me, but it seems to have lost half of its power. Or the effect of Sand through the wound is so strong that nothing can stop it.

Jatta looked at me warily and sat cautiously at a distance. As if I were a stranger and she hardly recognized me. ***Only oblivion awaits me...***

Namtar's Diary, Entry 85

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Ajit's death sobered the Prince – he saw him as a reflection of his own fate, and therefore he too would die sooner or later. The beast found him even after a thousand years! But it was also what inspired him – Ajit [*note from the Indian name "Ajeet/Ajit/Ajith", meaning "one who has not been defeated*"] was able to hold out for so long, more than any human can live, even in absolute peace and security.

The prince did not have time to become attached to his new acquaintance, did not see him as a true close friend, and, probably, that is why he was not deeply saddened by his death. The only thing that really brought them together was the fight against the Sands

and a common enemy - Dahaka. The prince lost not a comrade, but an ally. The one who knew something more and foresaw the possible development of events. Most of all, the Prince remembered his phrase: "Liberate the Sands!" It must have been very difficult for him to speak and he chose the most important, the most capacious words, discarding everything superfluous. Yes, Ajit did not know that the Prince had already done this, but this advice itself implied that he could see further than the Prince. Apparently, he implied that not only death awaited him, but also something else. Perhaps this is a hidden, hidden chance? But a chance for what? To gain freedom or just to postpone the inevitable? Or maybe a chance to stumble again? The prince was determined to find out at all costs.

Rushing through the throne room, the Prince ran up the stairs that led to the balcony that stretched along it. As he ran, he noticed the Hourglass, which looked exactly as he had remembered it in Azad: covered in a bright yellow glow that spread like a golden mist around it; mysterious and still the same attractive. And Maharaja would find them exactly the same many years later. So the Prince's assumptions were completely correct, and in an attempt to destroy the Sands of Time, he created them. The sands released from Kaileena's body gradually flowed into the Hours, and the great plan to create them was completed. Therefore, it was not at all surprising that Dahaka continued to chase after him.

After leaving the throne room, the Prince found himself in the Empress's chambers - many rooms united by a long corridor. Then they were replaced by a library - huge halls, filled from top to bottom with books. The smell in this place was very different from the rest of the fortress. At some point, the Prince, looking back warily, almost flew into the rack in the center of the hall. It was empty, but it was probably intended for some book, apparently extremely special. He had no time to stop and look around, to notice or find anything: Dahaka was fiercer than ever and relentlessly pursued him, not even allowing him to choose another path. Darkness and cold chased the Prince at his heels, squeezing his heart and clouding his vision.

The library was replaced by some more rooms and corridors, and at the end of the door a closed door awaited the Prince. He pushed the bolt aside as quickly as possible and ran away. It seemed that the fortress was over, but around it still towered walls, halls consisting of many tiers. However, they all looked long abandoned, abandoned. Apparently, this was the old part of the fortress, which no one had entered for many years.

A wall of water suddenly appeared in front of the Prince. He rushed from cold to cold. And then suddenly he felt warmth. Death does not warm - it means that he is alive. A menacing roar that enveloped the Prince with another wave of cold, Dahaka stopped and

even recoiled. Of course! The monster couldn't cross that wall! It was still strange for the prince to realize that such a creature could be in pain at all. Ajit couldn't do any damage to him, not a scratch! He seemed absolutely invulnerable. But it was true - his eyes were visible through the stream of water - they screamed with him, burning blood-red with rage and pain. Another moment and Dahaka disappeared, but the Prince knew that it would not be long and the horror would overtake him again and he would have to flee again. But still not now.

The prince leaned forward - he found himself in a fairly wide, poorly lit corridor. From somewhere there was a dampness, but still warmth was felt. The ringing of drops of falling water was the only thing that broke the silence enveloping everything. At first, the Prince was surprised that he was not in a hall with a portal, as had happened many times before. But after a moment, he suddenly realized what really struck him. Before he had time to recover from the chase, the Prince did not immediately notice that the walls around him had become gray and cracked, and the ceiling had collapsed in places, as if he was back in the present. In an instant, without any manipulation of the Sands. And even the locket was now hidden under the chest armor. He remembered perfectly well how, when he first entered the portal, he moved from one time to another. But then one reality was smoothly replaced by another. The first melted and the second appeared, gently and unhurriedly. This time, however, everything happened in a completely different way. As if someone cut through the window, roughly sewing two realities together with a water seam.

This sight struck the Prince immensely, he alternately shifted his gaze from one wall to another - both times were in his field of vision at once. He never ceased to be amazed at what was happening on this island and especially in the fortress. They merged into something unified, into a whole organism, where instead of veins there were endless corridors and secret passages through which the Sand spreads, as if nourishing this organism. But it was more complicated, it had some hidden mechanisms of self-regulation that were inaccessible to the Prince. Water, which seemed to contradict the very nature of the Sands, their nature, was nevertheless everywhere. And the Prince thought that he probably didn't have time to see much more. Something else seemed hidden from view. Thanks to this secret, incomprehensible balance of power, the fortress was not just the abode of the Sands, as it seemed at first glance. Barely perceptible strokes and fragments of these secrets led him forward, giving hope for something completely obscure and vague.

Driven by unceasing curiosity, the Prince walked over to the water, drew his sword from its sheath, and half-lowered it into the

stream, so that half of it would be in the past again. He wanted to see if anything would happen to an object that was in two times at once. But nothing has changed. The blade on the other side of the water was exactly the same, it only cut through the falling water, which made small drops splash more quickly to the sides. The prince put the sword back into its scabbard. He tried to look carefully into the water, but he saw only his reflection in it, in which there was nothing unusual at all. He ran his palm over this peculiar surface and felt a slight coolness and drops splashing again, this time directly into his face. And nothing else.

The prince put away his sword and put both palms into the water, trying to scoop up as much as he could, and washed his face. It was dirty, with traces of dried blood, his own and someone else's. Then he shook his head sharply, brushing the drops from his hair, wiped his hands against himself and looked back - he did not dare to go back, so he turned around and walked away, along the corridor.

It had a rather unusual outline - not the usual smooth walls made of brick, but smooth and shiny, with columns often planted, half-sunk into the wall. They had an unusual shape - not round, but an elongated rounded rectangle. After walking a little more, he became convinced that this part of the fortress was different from the rest - this was noticeable even despite the merciless time that had practically turned this place into ruins. Part of the walls collapsed, connecting the corridor with other rooms and halls.

The prince walked on, and soon found himself in front of another wall of water. It stemmed from a carved arch, the likes of which the Prince had not seen before. The top of the arch was made in the form of some branches, inconceivably intertwined with each other, lost in the wall and again showing out. The branches were decorated with many leaves carved out of stone, which ended approximately at waist level, and the bare branches diverged and curved in different directions and, as if growing into the floor. Somewhere in the distance, even through the sound of the water, the Prince could make out a dull growl and heavy footsteps - this time Dahaka did not think of giving up so easily. He was struggling to find a way to continue the chase, so the Prince stepped behind another curtain of water as soon as possible.

And again, in some absolutely incredible, incomprehensible way, the Prince found himself in another reality, in another time – the walls of the hall literally breathed freshness, it was well lit, the smell of dampness was gone. The footsteps of the beast subsided, although the Prince knew that the past was not safe for him now either, and Dahaka would haunt him even here. But the further the Prince went, the more he realized that he wasn't just in the past. He was in a time bubble again! Time around it froze, most likely, a very long time ago,

preserving this small part of the fortress in an almost pristine, untouched form, unlike the lifeless ruins that were left behind. But these differences only became apparent over time - whoever created this place obviously did not want to be discovered immediately. It became possible to expose the secret only thousands of years later. But, since this place still exists, it is likely that the secret has not been revealed until now. The prince felt that there was something common behind all this, uniting his individual findings into a single, holistic picture. They were all connected in some way. First a secret room with no entrance or exit at the base of the tower on the outer island, then the dungeon of Ajit, and now this place. They existed as if in spite of the fortress itself and its order. What if someone, like him, tried to hide from Dahaki? This question finally made the Prince's blind search in this place meaningful - until that moment, he did not know where and why he was going. He was only trying to hide from the pursuit, the personification of which drove the Prince further and further into the unknown.

But what exactly should he do with this discovery? Just stay here in a bubble and wait for centuries, like Ajit, for something to change? It was stupid and did not seem like a reasonable decision at all. The prince really wanted to find a way to pull the bubble with him, to move so that it would always remain around him. But he couldn't do that, so he reassured himself that he could always try to come back here if he needed to—now he knew that there was at least one safe and easily accessible place. So he decided to move on. Having randomly passed through the exit from the hall, the Prince found himself in the present again - time intervals were already predictably repeated, and he already guessed that more than one such movement awaited him ahead.

But suddenly, the Prince's thoughts were interrupted by Dahaka, who suddenly appeared in front of him, breaking through one of the walls. He blocked the Prince's passage, cutting him off from the saving arch ahead. He didn't have time to go back either: the monster was just a few steps away from him and would easily catch up with him. The only solution was to rush into the breach in the wall, from which the beast emerged. Not expecting such audacity, Dahaka hesitated for one saving moment for the Prince and rushed after him. But now the Prince had the advantage he needed - he gained a few seconds and ran with all his might to the next curtain of water, hoping to take refuge in the time bubble again, catch his breath and confuse the beast.

Surprisingly, this time all the Prince's guesses turned out to be true and, overcoming the next bend in the corridor, he saw a saving wall of water and in a moment returned to the past, obviously more distant than Kaileena's time. Turning back, he saw Dahaka that he

was frozen in front of the entrance and had no intention of going anywhere. The prince was already afraid that the way back was cut off and he was locked here, but he saw a second exit from the hall. Immediately proceeding to it, the Prince found himself in the present again and looked around in surprise - he found himself in the same hall where only a few minutes ago he had come up with the idea of time bubbles and the structure of this place. But now he looked lifeless: the ceiling had collapsed, and one of the exits was blocked. The walls were dilapidated and everything was ready to crumble into dust, sinking into oblivion. The prince smelled the dampness and looked around - some long plants, really resembling seaweed, hung from everywhere, covering the grayness of the walls and flaunting their gloomy smoky green color, which made the already dull picture even more depressing.

And again the footsteps of the monster came out of nowhere. Slowing down for a while, the Prince ran away again, this time the chase really tested his strength, forcing him to work to his limits.

This time, the Prince was deprived of choice and proceeded to the only exit from the hall, the path to which was clear. He was annoyed by the feeling that he had already been able to pass through time several times, but could not overcome the pitiful pile of stones. Space seemed to be subject to time, but now the Prince was losing that connection. On the contrary, time was poured into the long corridors of this huge and mysterious castle, and flowed through them monotonously, mournfully and submissively, like water locked in the banks of a slow plain river. And it was much easier to travel back in time here than to take a dozen steps in the right direction.

Further events merged into one indistinguishable whirlwind, a whirlpool of infinitely changing realities. The prince was drawn deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of space and time, from which he could not find a way out on his own. The past was replaced by the present and back again, halls and corridors alternated in all possible variations. The only thing that remained unchanged was the sound of heavy footsteps behind the Prince and the cold constantly catching up with him. His mind became clouded, he did not understand the road, he ceased to recognize the places in which he had already been - they all merged into a single stream that poured from somewhere above on his consciousness. And it even seemed to the Prince that in some incredible way Dahaka was familiar with this place - he chased it as if he knew every brick here and always easily found his way to the Prince. And again he drove him from reality to reality. Although he himself could hardly call all this reality. Anything – a dream, an illusion, a vision, a delusion, but not reality. It seemed that he was doomed to wander forever through these countless rooms and corridors, constantly jumping from one period of time to another,

burrowing deeper and deeper into this incredible and simply incomprehensible labyrinth. He wanted to stop, as if to protest against this unspoken compulsion, but he could not afford such a luxury. And again, pursued by his pursuer, the Prince rushed forward.

He had already ceased to understand whether he was running at all now or if it was all some kind of vision that the Prince had suddenly become a participant in. How many like him were there before? After all, if there was Ajit, then there were others! And Dahaka hunted for everyone, tracking and killing them as prey. Has anyone managed to go even one step further?

The only thing that sobered him up was that he noticed that at some point the times stopped alternating and, diving over and over again behind the wall of water, the Prince found himself in the present. This time, not even the locket that he tried to call into action as he had done before, did not help him. But it was all in vain. It seems that the beast knew what it was doing and drove him out of the relatively safe part of the fortress for the Prince. Soon, however, he noticed something that challenged this conjecture. Turning back, he saw that an air trail and a string of footprints stretched behind him, which quickly disappeared. They looked like blobs of color, supplanting this gray, lifeless reality with droplets of a rapidly fading past. But the Prince could not help it - the past, although it was somewhere nearby, for some reason refused to let him in. Meanwhile, his strength was almost running out, he was seized by panic - a little more and if he did not find a solution, he would be defeated by the beast. His breath was choking and his legs were giving way. Everything here resisted his presence, tried to expel or simply destroy him.

However, the Prince was still able to understand that despair was not the best ally at the moment. He had to think constructively, despite his fatigue. It was important to understand what had changed. Why does the past now repel him?

Continuing to ask questions, the Prince noticed that for the third or fourth time (and possibly more) he had run through the same place. He had been here three minutes ago, he knew that for sure. It turns out that now the animal was chasing him in circles. And he needs to somehow break out of it, find at least some way out!

The prince decided to listen not only to his reason, but also to his feelings, although it was not easy to do so: hot and tired, his whole body felt only the scorching cold and the beats of a frantic pounding heart, the only thing that fought against him. But seizing the moment after another wall of water, the Prince listened to himself again and felt that the cold was also coming from the locket. He reached under his chest armor and pulled it out. This time, touching

it did not give the Prince anything - the locket seemed to be silent: no visions, no strange sensations - nothing. As if it were just a useless piece of metal.

Suddenly, the Prince stumbled and fell to the floor. Around him, the past flashed like a bright spot for a moment and immediately faded away. Dahaka had not yet returned and continued the chase, but the Prince lay exhausted on the floor, as if waiting for his death. His chin was shaking, as if he could not feel his legs. His gaze was fixed upwards, and the ceiling high above him pressed against him. It seemed to the prince that in another second he would either collapse on him at once or slowly descend and crush him. This strange feeling made him press even harder into the cold stone. Falling, he hit his left elbow hard. Mixed with everything the Prince felt, the pain turned into insane torture. His scream shook the walls and ceiling, it was so strong that it seemed that the Prince wanted to destroy everything with them and free his mind from this nightmare. Pain surrounded him from all sides and crept up to his throat confidently and deliberately slowly, as if it was going to strangle him, but not immediately, but to torture him first, cutting a noose thrown by an invisible killer into his skin. The blood seemed to stop, despite the incredibly strong pounding of the heart, the breath bursting out of it in rare sounds, mixed with sobs and already silent screams. He had run out of strength to scream for real. He tried desperately to jump up, waving his arms around. Several times he grabbed some stones on the floor, but his hand slipped and they just rolled away. A chill swept over his body, and the chain with the medallion twisted so that it now hung on the side of his back. And he seemed to be reaching down, pulling back the chain, which caused it to crash into the Prince's throat. He was so weak that he could not resist even such a trifle, and over and over again he fell to the floor. The prince slammed his hand on the floor as if it could change anything. But this only caused him more pain, blood appeared on his palm - he scratched it a sharp stone. No one and nothing would have saved him at that second, as he thought. Error... All life is a meaningless mistake. And all he deserves is death. Excruciating torture to the last drop of blood. And he couldn't fix anything.

–No! The Prince roared.

Wild rage literally poured out of his eyes, and at the same time, an incredible power awoke in him. He rolled from his back to his stomach, digging his fingers into the stone chips on the floor. Leaning on the palm of his hand, he pushed off the floor with a sharp jerk and jumped to his feet. He clenched his teeth as if he wanted to crumble them into powder. His fists were clenched in a similar way, until their fingers hurt. It was as if he was deliberately causing himself even

more pain, hoping to squeeze the rest of his strength out of his body for another spurt. Perhaps the last one.

And suddenly, somewhere to the left, a terrible rumble was heard, bricks fell, a shiver ran along the entire wall, mixed with cold, and terribly familiar. Acquaintances, as well as the menacing roar that he heard instantly behind all this noise. Blending in with the noise, it became even more terrifying. In the place where the wall did not reach the ceiling, ending with something like windows, one opposite the other, it was literally torn and destroyed. Dahaka stepped out through the opening and moved towards the Prince. He had a second to make an agonizing choice - to die immediately or rush towards the wild agony that would give him a couple more terrible moments of life. But the last second was rushing away and he grabbed the locket with hatred and, tearing it off the chain, threw it at the beast. As if it could somehow delay or distract him. Not having reached about five paces, the medallion vanished into thin air, turning into gold dust. The prince was going to get rid of him anyway - he just didn't have time to do it in time, that's why his gesture was so impulsive and desperate now.

And he began to run again, breathing abruptly. But before he had taken ten steps, he noticed that everything around him began to change - he still heard heavy fast steps behind him, but every moment he felt more and more clearly how the old ruined castle seemed to come to life, renew, light up with its former brilliance. Each step of the Prince, merging with the beating of his heart, released millions of sparks of his past life, causing everything around him to glow and absorb the sounds of these blows, soaking up life. And driving Dahaka away. But still frightened, the Prince ran and it seemed to him that he heard every step of the wild beast, the rumble of the wall destroyed a second ago was still buzzing in his head. Now he was running through time, which opened a new passage for him where a second ago there had been a pile of stones. It seems that the Prince has finally managed to break out of the vicious circle.

Closer to the middle of the hall in which he found himself, he could see a small elevation, which gradually grew before his eyes, turning from a pile of stones into a perfect circle. And right before his eyes, some kind of statue grew on this pedestal. The prince, frantically running his eyes from side to side, did not notice any unevenness on the floor as he ran and stumbled again. He flew a few steps and fell loudly to the floor, continuing to approach the moment when this hall was truly untouched by time. Falling, the Prince immediately got on his hands, turned to face the horror and, sitting on the floor, tried to crawl back, desperately pushing off with his legs and trying to get up. It was as if he still saw Dahaka, heard his merciless footsteps, and felt a cold gaze. But they had vanished into

thin air a few seconds ago, it was just that the Prince's memory refused to instantly obey this fact. A wave of cold terror washed over him, which seemed to pass through him and instantly melt away. The prince felt Dahaka pass in the same place where he was now, but in a different time, in the one from which he was able to escape, but the terrible beast was not.

The prince stood up and looked around. He found himself in a medium-sized round hall with a low ceiling and a balcony around the perimeter on the second tier, which was supported by thick columns. The hall was lit by torches attached to them. There were no other sources of light in the hall, it was devoid of windows, although the air here seemed unusually fresh and pleasant. And almost the entire hall was dotted with arches that served as exits from the hall - the Prince counted about twenty of them. But no sooner had the hall taken shape than it immediately continued to change literally before our eyes. A sight that is almost impossible to imagine without seeing and feeling it yourself. A second ago, the Prince saw a completely flat and unindented reality, outlined by the golden-red light of torches. But in a few moments, everything changed incredibly - everything around - the air, the walls, the floor, and the ceiling seemed to consist of scraps, mixed with each other and forming an incredible chaos. The walls were covered with spots from two times at the same time - large gray spots roughly cut into small golden gaps, and vice versa, large drops of the past were slightly diluted with the grayness of the present. But beyond that, there was something else in the air. Something hot, but not scorching, and relentlessly following him in every patch of air, something cold and empty, permeated if not with horror, then with something frightening and repulsive. The air was dotted with small reddish spots that burned a little brighter than the light of torches. And there were no fewer other spots that almost did not let in light, but only glowed with darkness, although through them it was still possible to see the rest of the hall without much difficulty. Because of all this, the outlines of the room were constantly blurring, and the surrounding reality resembled a palette of colors mixed at random, in some points of which time seemed to pulsate, flowing from one point to another.

At the same time that the Prince saw all these jumbled fragments of time and reality, he felt a million incredible feelings fill his body and soul. He saw fragments of some strange images, fragments of events, heard incoherent voices and even distinguished the faces of people who rushed past him. For a moment, he even thought he saw himself. And the place itself gradually became something different, looked different – without a statue, taller and wider, with a larger entrance – in all kinds of variations. And still

some people rushed past him, voices rushed by, mixing into a strange whirlwind, in which it was difficult to make out anything.

The prince felt lost, lost, and the best way to explain this was that he found himself at the intersection of all possible times and realities. A special place that contradicted fate and the timeline. He was convinced that there could be only one lineage, but he had tried to challenge its immutability, seeking to rewrite his fate for the past seven years. But in this place, she was simply blind and seemed to allow for any outcome, any development of events out of billions of possible ones. However, he felt quite real, his mind did not flow away somewhere, dissolving in a strange whirlwind. The visions were more like scraps of memories, strange to him, but somehow shaped and permeated his mind. But what was their source? Maybe this statue?

The prince looked at her attentively, coming closer - she, like everything else in the hall, seemed to consist of a pile of strange spots, some of which sometimes made her partially invisible; her image trembled in the air, but on the whole, it was still clearly present before the Prince's eyes. He could not see the face or even the clothes of the person she was portraying - it was blurred like all the others that flashed around the Prince in bright but short flashes.

All this continued until, among the millions of these faces, he saw one, the only one he knew and belonged to a person he could trust at least in any way - Ajit. And then the Prince tried his best to concentrate on him, following his path and saw how, in the hall that had regained its shape, Ajit approached the statue and removed from his neck... medallion! Moreover, the Prince was able to understand what exactly he took only after the object was in Ajit's hands. The prince found it very strange that he had to get rid of it just a few minutes ago to get to this place, when suddenly he had the opportunity to take possession of it again. But Dahak had been swallowed up by the locket! Is there really another? The questions multiplied at an incredible speed, further increasing the confusion around the Prince.

But even though he could clearly see Ajit's every move, almost every step he took, the Prince knew that none of this had ever happened. It could have happened, but fate decreed otherwise. He himself saw how Ajit died, literally died in his arms. And now all this remained only a memory of what did not happen. That's what Ajit was talking about, this was what he knew! This is what he wanted to tell the Prince before his death. It turned out that if he were still alive, he would have rushed to this goal himself, deceptively pretending to be indifferent to everything around him for the time being. And then, perhaps, it would even happen that he would confront the Prince. Ajit wouldn't have anything against him personally, he would just get in his way. After all, despite the deception, his goal was real, truthful -

in this the Prince could still trust Ajit, although he still did not understand the essence of these aspirations. And, besides, why could only the one who released the Sands of Time find this place? He and Ajit were connected only by a common enemy, Dahaka. How could the personification of fate lead a timeline violator to such a controversial place?

Approaching the statue, the Prince could not see the blurred outline of the medallion around her neck. But as he drew nearer, at the foot of the statue, he suddenly found a scattering of them, which he determined more by sound than by sight. There were many of them, several hundred, and the Prince did not understand how he could find the right one among them. If they were all real, then what is their value? It turns out that they are easily reproducible, and are not something unique, inaccessible and significant. But realizing that he was definitely facing some kind of deliberately left riddle, a secret, the Prince guessed that there could be no obvious solution to it. All he had to do was trust the vision with Ajit, and blindly reached out his hand to the statue's chest. Feeling a strange warmth, he actually felt for the locket on the metal chain. Even before he took it off his neck, he felt that the relief pattern on the medallion was different from the one he was already familiar with. In the center, there was no round tubercle, only a crescent moon along the edge of the disk. Just like in the diary! Another medallion, which differed from the first very slightly, subtly subtly. But it definitely deserved attention, and the scattering at the foot of the statue was probably just a pile of fakes. So the locket Kaileena had given him was also a fake? Therefore, this secret that the Prince had discovered was hidden even from her sight?

Now the Prince understood why he had to throw away the locket. It wasn't a victim, and it didn't matter at all that it was fake. This place was hidden and arranged in such a way that none of the Guardians, as Ajit called them, could get here. And a sure sign of this was the presence of any of the relics of the Sand - a medallion, a ring or a dagger. And the only mention of this place, albeit indirect, was in Namtar's diary. And, probably, he also told Ajit about it. Was Namtar an enemy of the Guardians, not one of them? And now the Prince was involved in this confrontation.

As soon as he took the medallion in his hand and brought it to his face to get a better look, the hall and the statue suddenly took on sharp outlines almost in an instant. The Prince's sense of touch did not fail him, and the relief on the medallion was indeed different from what he had seen before. But on closer inspection, he noticed that the bump in the center was not just missing, but was just grinded, as evidenced by the characteristic scratches and abrasions in the center of the disk.

The Prince had no doubt that this locket was special and real. It even differed to the touch, not being smooth, like a fake one, but rough and worn. It was a true medallion that had survived from time immemorial. The one whose imprint is preserved on the last page of Namtar's diary. He had put in an incredible amount of effort to hide it like that. And this means that he really had value and some special capabilities, unlike the trinkets under his feet. The prince bent down and picked up one of them. He turned it in his hands and, after a moment, it suddenly melted right in his palm, raising up tongues of yellow sand flames, which then turned into light specks of dust, immediately dissipating in the air, leaving only memories. The prince looked at his palm in surprise, not believing what had happened a second ago. He bent down once more and scooped up a handful of small discs, and each of them, one by one, disappeared from his palm in the same strange and inexplicable way. Still in disbelief, the Prince touched the palm of his hand with two fingers of his other hand and found that it was indeed empty. He bent down again and ran his fingertips along the entire placer, admiringly catching bright and rapid flashes one after another.

The prince understood. The real locket he held in his other hand revealed the truth. He was the source of all these memories and images that had recently swirled around the Prince. It made it possible to distinguish truth from lies, real from fake. It seemed surprising to the prince, but incredibly familiar. He had forgotten that strange feeling, but now it was reviving in him. The last time he had experienced something like this had been when he had first obtained a dagger. But it seems to have surpassed it, holding an incredible number of memories and variants of the past and future. He could amplify the Prince's own memories, he could give someone else's, because surely the Sands, with which the medallion is full, captured every moment of the life of the previous owner. And, for sure, he, like a dagger, is able to move the owner in time, even if only a few moments back - this could be quite enough, because in some situations just a second could determine the entire fate of a person. Both the future and even the past. The prince was fully convinced that time is a very vague, unclear, but insidious and unpredictable concept.

Holding in his hands such a valuable, in his opinion, find, the Prince, however, had no idea what to do with it and how it could help him. Some vague ideas were born in his head, in which he found a possible use for the unusual properties of the medallion, either somehow strengthening them with the help of the Sands, or trying to literally replace reality, again finding himself at the intersection of times and worlds and choosing the one he needed. There were many doors around him leading away from this strange place, and each of

the exits could lead to one of these realities, strikingly different from each other. But all the exits themselves looked decidedly the same, and it was difficult to choose the right one. So many options and none was no better or worse than the other. The prince had no choice but to try at random.

Relying on luck, he went to the nearest door, which was located exactly opposite the one through which he entered this hall. And without noticing any jumps or flashes, he went out... in the same hall. From the same arch I walked through a few minutes ago. Looking around uncomprehendingly, the Prince decided to try another, went through it and everything repeated again: he again went out of the door on the opposite side. And then again and again. Each of the attempts ended in the same way. It was as if he was locked in this hall. Lots of doors and no exits. He began to think that he must look something completely different. Trapped in time, he couldn't rely on ordinary doors and keys. But he did not understand why, being worthy to set foot in this secret place, he could not leave it now? Or is the time not yet come? Maybe he still hadn't found what he needed to find, hadn't seen what he should have seen? After all, he really still had no idea what to do with all these finds and discoveries.

Apparently, this place was created for the sole purpose of leaving a message. And it doesn't really matter to whom—all the people whose faces flashed in the recent vision were united by the same problems. And even their goals were probably similar. But, for example, what distinguished Ajit from the Prince was that he possessed some initial, primordial knowledge. The Prince simply had nothing, only random guesses, fragmentary information and entries in the diary. And Ajit didn't have time to tell him anything. Perhaps the Prince should not have been guided by him at all, but should have followed the one who stood at the very origins. To those in whose footsteps Ajit himself walked...

The prince glanced at the base of the statue. The inscription on it eloquently read: "Namtar", although by this time the Prince had no doubt about the identity of the person who arranged all this. But why did he need this vanity? Why was it necessary to leave this statue when the only source of memory of it – real, not fictional – was most likely the same medallion? And now the Prince understood well why and from whom Namtar was so diligently hiding it, even though he still did not see the message itself. But what he didn't understand was how exactly he could help him? What plan could he come up with that would help both Ajit and anyone who came in his place, including the Prince?

He examined the statue once more, carefully. It depicted a man with his left hand outstretched forward, whose thumb and index finger were clutching something small, like a key. But there was

neither him nor the door that he would unlock. The man held his other hand at waist level, slightly bent at the elbow, so that his fingers seemed to reach for the hilt of a sword enclosed in a stone sheath. But he didn't have the blade on his belt. His clothes resembled those worn by the Prince - the clothes of a warrior: trousers, tightly tied with a belt, some kind of sleeveless shirt, tied in several places with straps, so that it fit snugly to the body and a small turban neatly tied around his head with tucked ends. The Prince could not see the face - in this part the stone was almost smooth, only outlining the most general outlines of a human face: nose, eye sockets and chin.

And then the statue collapsed in an instant, apparently its existence was no longer necessary, leaving only memories and a pedestal with a name on it. The memory now retained the general outlines, its strange posture and mysterious innuendos in the image itself. The prince immediately realized what the meaning of these riddles was - he had to find the missing elements. But where, in what way and why? He still did not understand this, nor did he see the connection between them. He realized that he was tired of marking time, asking endless questions, and wrapped his hand around the locket. The vision that he revealed to the Prince was rather vague and incoherent. He was standing in the same place as a few seconds ago. He saw the same hall. The hand he saw in front of him was also clutching the locket. But it wasn't his hand. And not his body. And it was completely beyond his control. He understood it unequivocally the next second when this someone walked in the direction of the exit. Each of the outputs, at the same time. And then the vision became even more blurred, ambiguous and decidedly incomprehensible. It was as if all possible options for what was happening were superimposed on each other again. It was as if Namtar, in whose body the Prince felt himself, was asking him: "What are you looking for and what do you want to achieve?"

But the Prince still didn't know. His thoughts raced in an agonizing search for at least some idea, the slightest clue. However, he did not find the answer in himself. He realized more and more that he could only blindly believe this fragile, weightless and indistinct memory. Follow him wherever it leads. To understand - what did Namtar himself want?

The prince noticed the stranger's strange clothes. Over the robes he saw on the statue, Namtar wore a long dark brown robe, with a huge hood pulled over his face, bell sleeves, and a bottom dragging along the ground. It seemed to be trying to hide his appearance, although, unlike the statue, the vision still had a face, albeit hidden in the shadows. But soon the Prince noticed something else. He didn't just see through Namtar's eyes, he seemed to feel the

same as he did. He felt the pain inside him, the frost ran over his skin, and it seemed that the Sand was devouring him from the inside. The prince felt his life fading away, still resisting, but with the last of his strength, burning him from the inside in contrast to the cold. This confrontation gave him this incredible pain, it killed him. It divided his whole life into before and after, drawing a line. And now the Prince could see that there wasn't much difference between them. What difference did it make if the Sand gnawed at them from within or from the outside, whether the changes were external (as in the case of Namtar, who clearly limped and moved somewhat clumsily) or internal? Obviously, he, like the Prince, wanted to somehow prolong his life. Or better yet, get a second chance.

And then the Prince felt something engraved in his memory, and quite independently of his will. As if someone makes a small incision in his memories and pours something new into it. The path in front of Namtar suddenly flashed with a bright light and they finally left the hall. Now the Prince had no control at all - Namtar was leading him somewhere. And the memories finally took the form of the words that sounded in the Prince's mind:

"I fought and fell. Dahaka is chasing me and I can't hide from him. But the Sand Spirit Mask gave me a second chance. She allowed me to walk the path of a ghost, against the tide of time, and change my fate. And the medallion was like an anchor for me on this unusual journey - it allowed me to stop in time and not go into oblivion.

The prince hardly understood everything that the voice inside him was saying, but he caught the essence - the Mask gave the ability to travel back in time, and at the request of its owner. Almost the same as the bubble he found in prison. And probably everyone else. But in some incomprehensible way, they were unusable – either they were only available in the present, or they were simply impossible to get into (except for accidents).

The prince did not know where the Mask came from: whether Namtar created it or whether it came from even more ancient times. But he clearly understood that the mysterious guide was leading him to where she was. Sometimes it seemed to the Prince that he was still feeling his body, but only for a short time, for very short periods of time. Namtar, meanwhile, passed through several halls and courtyards, came out to some square. In the distance he could see some buildings that resembled houses, but they looked more expensive and richer than the miserable shacks that the Prince had seen on the outer island.

Time seemed to tremble around him, and sometimes people flashed around, who then disappeared without a trace. The prince felt the breath of antiquity, stronger than when he first found himself in the past. The memory that was pulling him along was so distant and

faint, like a morning dream, that it could not stop at a certain point in time, but ran back and forth. Turning into an inconspicuous alley, Namtar rushed into the thickets at the foot of the cliff and soon disappeared into some cave. All the rest of the way, he walked in absolute darkness, and even closed his eyes, as if he had some special skill to see in the darkness. In his skin, the Prince felt that the caverns were filled with a thick fog, and even by the light of torches it was impossible to find his way through this labyrinth. It seems that Namtar was the only one who knew her.

At some point, the Prince saw a stone wall in front of him, in which a stream of water had made a passage over the years. Behind it, very close, I could see some kind of pedestal. Namtar squeezed into the resulting crevasse (the Prince was sure that it did not exist in Namtar's time, but he had planned its appearance) and approached the dais. A thin beam of light struck from somewhere to the side, allowing me to see at least something, for the first time in a long time. The prince saw in front of him something like a mummy, frozen in a strange sitting position on a cracked and rickety pedestal. The garments of the body had decayed over the years, and it was impossible to even guess to whom it belonged. The mummy had something like a mask on its face.

At that moment, something unexpected happened: the Prince felt control of his body again, and the vision left him in an instant. It turns out that all this time it only seemed to him that he was in another body. But in fact, this someone else's memory was in himself! And it led him straight to the promised goal. Literally at arm's length. The prince still did not understand the scale and essence of Namtar's plan, but he felt a trembling admiration for him - it seemed that he saw through time, knew exactly in advance what would happen and how. And he left clues and hiding places in the right places and only for those who really needed them.

The prince approached the deceased and carefully removed the mask from his face. It seemed to him quite weighty, had a bronze hue, and the inside was covered with writing in the same language as in the diary, but very small. Trying to read, the Prince suddenly discovered that the symbols seemed to jump from place to place, emitting a barely noticeable glow. It is not known whether it was a play of light or some feature of the mask, but the Prince could not make out a single word and therefore decided to finally put it on.

In the next instant, as soon as the mask touched the Prince's face, thousands of needles pierced his body. A throbbing pain engulfed literally every part of his body, and the reality around him faded. There was no cave around, there was no strange mummy that had kept the Mask all these years, not even that ray of light. There was only tearing pain, a feeling of death agony and falling into an

invisible abyss that sucked him in with incredible force. The current carried him through a thick fog that burned his skin with cold. It seemed that he was about to be lost in it forever. The prince screamed with all his might in pain, although it hardly helped him. He felt as if his whole body was being devoured by some invisible monster, without form or form, which resembled, rather, some kind of terrible, merciless element. The prince was literally dying, and although the feeling itself could not be familiar to him, he was somehow sure of it. And only his consciousness by some miracle still did not fade away.

Soon he completely ceased to feel the body, it is not known whether it was dead or because the pain was so unbearable. And then he could see what kind of abyss he was being dragged into, that was the time. He flew through it like a disembodied spirit, in the opposite direction, and saw the entire Island in full view. It was only by some incredible coincidence that his attention caught on the moment when he was approaching the Island, sitting in the same boat with Farang. This point in time was a kind of separator. A line beyond which events began to branch, overlap and get confused. The prince remembered that the passage of time seemed very strange to him then, and for some reason he decided that the Island or its lord did not want to let him in with weapons in his hands. And he got rid of it, wanting to show that he was not afraid of any trials and was ready to go to the end, if only for the opportunity to try to carry out his audacious plan.

As if responding to the Prince's thoughts, the medallion pulled him somewhere upwards and with one sharp and rough movement stopped the fall and the passage of time. The prince felt his body and the pain that pierced through him again, although it was already much weaker than a few moments ago. But he was still unable to stand on his feet. He could only crawl to the water that accumulated near the pedestal and flowed into a small crack behind him to see with his own eyes what he already had almost no doubt. Two white, slightly glowing eyes looked at him from the reflection. The face, as well as the whole body, was covered with blackened skin with sparse white spots, rags hanging from the back of the head, chest and shoulders and dotted with scabs and strange furrows. The prince literally looked like a dead man alive. He became a Being.

The very thing that mysteriously followed him throughout the fortress, hindered and annoyed him, but never entered into open confrontation. And once it even saved him from imminent death... at the cost of his life!

Even if he was able, the Prince couldn't utter a word.

Chapter 28. Beyond the Line

The dagger exceeded all my expectations. He turned out to be capable of incredible things. Not only can it literally take me back in time a few moments, but it can also see the past, and a much more distant one, through memories. As if its blade cuts through the veil of time and through this incision the events of the past years flow into the dagger, and through it into my consciousness. I saw a lot of my past as soon as I accidentally thought about it for a moment. In my vision, I met Inanna again. Oh, how beautiful she is! The vision was so real, so alive. It was not fleeting, time was in no hurry to take it away from me - I was free to live these moments over and over again. And everyone seems to be a little different as soon as I think about it. The memories were incredibly detailed, I can still hear the laughter of a very young Ninninamash. It fluttered around us, chirping incessantly, like a little bird. And I noticed in my memories many things that I had not seen before. For example, how detached and withdrawn Nergal was, especially since his mother and sister died. I lost him insanely long ago, even then his heart became black and cold.

Here, in the damp darkness of the deep caverns, in my sorrowful and difficult moments, these sweet memories were better for me than any medicine. They soothed my pain and mental anguish. In this way my destruction was not so painful, and I was still able, though with great difficulty, to hold the bits of my shattering consciousness together. ***I'll need it again, for the last desperate plan.***

Namtar's Diary, Entry 88

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Nergal's guesses about the unusual nature of Namtar turned out to be true. Originally, he had expected the transformation to happen almost instantly, but not only did Namtar manage to escape, but he was also able to hide from Nergal for a long time and harass him from time to time. And unlike the rest of the sand monsters, he didn't obey him. From time to time, Namtar was seen in various parts of the Island, and Nergal made attempts to capture and capture him. But no one knew where he was hiding or where he would show up next. Sometimes he was seen even on Usakar, but Sand made him stronger and he easily dealt with several soldiers.

Jatta was hiding with Namtar. For all this time, no one has seen her at all. Zulu lost his way looking for her, but was unsuccessful. Nergal was very angry about this, but over and over again he ordered the Executor to continue his search. He did not give up hope of

finding Jatta, knowing that Namtar was hiding her for a reason. What was he up to? It seemed that now they had switched roles, and it was up to Nergal to worry and rack his brains trying to unravel the enemy's plan. Namtar had little time left, so he would definitely try to come up with something before he finally turned into a monster. If only his mind is still capable of something.

Namtar began to change. His face and skin have changed. Jatta still stuck with him, but sometimes he felt like she was about to run away. He himself was at a complete loss. He didn't know where to start, but he knew that it would soon be over for him. He lost this war. Fate made its choice, derailing the future of the Island - Nergal put a fat cross on it. What can be done in such a situation? Namtar invariably returned to the same thought - the murder of Nergal. But how? His attempts using Sand failed. Using the enemy's weapon against him turned out to be a bad idea - the enemy wielded this power better than him. So much so that now Namtar himself has become a creature of the Sands of Time. Though not completely, he felt them breaking his will, confusing his thoughts, and rebuilding his body. Very soon, Nergal will find a way to subdue him. So, the best solution would be to abandon the Sands and search for their opposite.

But one day, what he feared most happened. He has lost himself. His consciousness faded for a while. The sand in it took over and released the monster into the wild. He did not pursue the same goals as Namtar, but only wandered aimlessly around the fortress until he caught the eye of the guards. They approached him with apprehension, and realizing that this time everything was different, they knocked him down and tied his hands and feet, after which they hurried to bring him to Nergal. He was incredibly happy with such luck and, without even trying to figure out what had happened, hurried to take advantage of this chance. Namtar's consciousness was awakened at the moment when he was on his knees, bound and surrounded by an angry crowd. He couldn't see anything – his body was covered with a large piece of cloth. Moments later, he heard Nergal's voice addressing the crowd.

"Look at your ruler!"

And he immediately pulled off Namtar the cloth that covered him. Surprised sighs rolled through the crowd.

"It's a monster!" Nergal continued. "Look what he did to himself!" Do you want such a future for yourself?

–No! No! – was heard from the crowd. People were ready to rush at Namtar and tear him to pieces right on the spot - they were held back only by a small detachment of guards.

Nergal moved away from Namtar and motioned for the crowd to stop, saying:

"Death will be too easy for him. He deserved real suffering and will pay for all his deeds in full!

After a few seconds of confusion, cheers of approval began to be heard from the crowd. Namtar himself barely had the strength to comprehend what was happening. His tongue did not obey him and instead he let out some kind of growl, which frightened and angered the people around him even more. Nergal decided not only to eliminate him, but to torment him as long as possible. Intense pain spread through his body as he regained consciousness. Why did he regain consciousness at all? Wouldn't it have been better to remain a monster forever and not face the consequences of his mistakes and failures, the people who hated him? And with the one he once considered his son.

Nergal ordered Namtar to be taken to prison and chained to the wall. He was left there for several days without food or water, which he spent in semi-oblivion. His memory came back to him in waves, mostly about events before he collapsed consciousness. Those hours or days that he had been a monster had turned into a mist, and he couldn't catch anything but blurry images. He remembered only the sensation of what it was like to look through someone else's eyes. At these moments, the world around him seemed to change, he saw it differently. Movements were spasmodic, impulsive. Namtar felt an unusually strong rage, turning into hatred, black and literally poisonous. It seemed to him that he could kill with just one look or touch.

Namtar was a little wrong about Nergal's motives. In pain and anguish, he could not reason sensibly, and thought that was Nergal's purpose. But he looked at things differently: if before that he could act for a long time allegedly on behalf of Namtar, earning people's love for him, now he could strengthen his position on the contrast. He was a man, not a monster like his mad father. He was seen as a future deliverer from the oppression of a tyrant.

Nergal managed to deceive everyone. He promised people a universal cure for the Namtar plague, but by showing him in the guise of a monster, he convinced everyone that the experiments had gone too far - he almost managed to turn into Zervan. And now it will take much more time and effort to get rid of this filth, which seems to have already permeated everyone in the fortress and on the Island. He made people think of Namtar what he thought of him. And this only strengthened Namtar's confidence in his rightness and desire to find some special weapon against Nergal until he finally completed the transformation.

Nergal visited the dungeon and tried to get his father to talk, but he made little answer and looked away. At some point, Namtar felt a surge of strength and tore off his chains. He moved menacingly

towards Nergal. Hatred gave him strength - at first he fought it and did not want to submit to the nature of the monster, but at some point he simply gave up. He only tried his best to keep himself conscious and not to fall into unconsciousness again. Nergal was ready for this, he knew that one day Namtaru would have the strength to break the bonds and hide again. But only until the next failure, which will happen more and more often - on this Island, he cannot hide from the Sand.

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Namtar once again took refuge in the depths of the caverns, spending his days in endless contemplation and searching. He could spend all his time on them - his new body did not require food and sleep. But each time he ran into some invisible wall. His goal was hers, but he couldn't even stretch out his hand. Nergal resisted Namtar finding any thread in his memories, which were one with Sand. But this only meant that Nergal had something to fear. There is something more powerful than the Sands, something that they fear and tell Nergal to avoid. What is this? Another element?

Nergal solved this riddle before Namtar. But he did something different - he used it again against Namtar. There was no way he could protect himself from it, because it was everywhere. But he used the water against the Namtar monster to prevent him from entering the time portal. He blocked off each of the entrances to the halls with them with a wall of water. No sand monster could overcome it. Perhaps that was why Nergal had been so afraid of her when he returned. Sand felt threatened. But Nergal himself could tolerate it - the Sand did not impregnate his body so much. Rather, only his consciousness. And he had to wait for Namtar to finally disappear, locked in this time.

Namtar, finally realizing what he had been looking for so long, decided to find a way to endow any weapon with the power of water, just as the Sands had endowed the dagger with power. He wanted it to be a large and elegant sword this time, one that would leave Nergal no chance, even if he managed to perform the Rite of Transfiguration. But how can he, a sand monster, awaken this powerful element and summon it to his side?

"If only I could find a way to be myself again for a while," Namtar thought incessantly.

And every day it was as if he was looking for this door within himself through which he could leave his body. But even if he found it, he would need the key to it. A key that is not given just like that. A huge sacrifice is needed, an irreparable loss. It will be this key. He will literally need to put his life into the keyhole, without hoping that

he will get it back. But what if someone on the other side can accept and protect her?

So the days passed, and Nergal, in the meantime, began to fulfill his promise:

"That day has come, my friends!" The Great Transformation begins today! The enemy has been defeated and nothing prevents us from taking our lives into our own hands and making them the way we have always wanted them to be," he once mysteriously announced.

But his plan was not what anyone had expected, neither for the men of the fortress nor for Namtar. He did not start with himself – it seems that he was in no hurry with this at all – but with the fortress itself. He built many new time portals, still blocking them off with a wall of water - the rivers in the mountains were full of water all year round. The hall in which the Abyss was located was also rebuilt. Instead of a floor, there was only one large stone staircase that led to a platform that resembled a sacrificial altar. The walls of the hall grew directly from the edges of the Abyss, merging with it into a single whole. Once visiting this place, Namtar decided that Nergal was preparing for some rite, ritual. And it will be very unusual, incomprehensible to him. Namtar did not understand what he had to resist at all - Nergal's actions were too unpredictable and disorderly.

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Nergal explained to the people of the fortress why he had created the Hourglass. Unbeknownst to Namtar, he devised a way to heal the people of the Sands, a huge reservoir that would slowly draw them out of the sick. It would take years, but he assured everyone that there was no other way. And it is better at least this way than to give people to be devoured by the Sands.

In fact, Nergal intended it as part of his grand plan, the Great Transformation, the details of which he still hid from everyone. And with each passing day, he only increased his influence, soaking the bodies of people with the Sands more and more. For a long time, none of the people understood that the point of no return had already been passed, as if they were beyond the line that they themselves gladly crossed and would never be able to return. And all the while, Nergal studied them, watched how the Sands concentrated in people. He was looking for an answer to the question of whether there is a limit to this saturation? Will the human body survive? After all, no matter how hard you try, you cannot fit more water in a vessel than its internal volume allows. But what is Peski like? How much can they thicken? Over time, Nergal found answers to almost all of his

questions. All he had to do was take possession of the dagger that Namtar had been hiding from him.

When people understood everything, it was too late. Nergal and his army of sand monsters wielded absolute power over the Island. No one could oppose him with anything and, gradually, fear and a sense of hopelessness forced everyone to bow their heads and continue to live in a new reality. Soon after, Nergal almost ceased to show himself to people, guiding through his entourage. There were silly rumors that Namtar had won Nergal over to his side or something, but no one cared anymore.

Nergal did not want to simply turn everyone into monsters and control them without any purpose. He strove to give everything a form, new and hitherto unseen. And the Island, and the Sands, and even Fate - what he didn't believe in himself should help him in the long run.

Nergal liked the idea of the Clockwork Tower from the very beginning, the way it ruled the entire Island, and all the details were in place and played their intended role. He wanted to fill the whole Island, the whole world, with such an order. To make everything around obedient, manageable and predictable. And his monsters will have to become part of this mechanism. He will assign each of them his own role in this system. Except that it was more convenient not to mess with each one individually, but to divide them into groups and create your own teachings for them.

Some, as before, would have to guard the Island on the approaches and even at sea - he tried to make them almost insensitive to water. But the eternal internal resistance to this element made them not too strong and smart. They were cannon fodder, always took the first blow and were a renewable resource. These soldiers were nicknamed the Facelings, because of the bone masks they wore as they grew into them over the years. It didn't matter who was behind them, they just had to fulfill their role. They did not have any other distinguishing features or talents. They were not very capable of skilled sword fighting, and more often chose axes, axes, maces, or hammers.

Another group was the Overseers, the inner guard of the fortress, consisting of squads of three or four people. Their battle uniforms were different from the Facelings, being red in color and bearing the symbol of the Island on their backs, which Nergal had remodeled in his own way. The Overseers prevented the enemy from reaching the most important parts of the fortress—the Garden, the Mecha Tower, the Library of Namtar (Nergal had chosen to keep it), and others—and oversaw the labor of the common people, who had become, in effect, slaves. The overseers were armed with swords,

possessed great strength, and retained the ability to talk to each other.

The last, special group was named "Executioners". They were incredibly strong and cruel warriors, whose tasks included prison guarding, torture and executions. They also had their own school called "Sha-Gaz", the essence of which was briefly reduced to the principle of "cruelty for the sake of cruelty". Armed with maces with thin spikes, they inflicted injuries on their enemies in battle and immediately ruthlessly finished them off. And the executions of prisoners in prison were carried out just like that, without sentences.

Each of the groups was trained in its own combat school, which honored the traditions of this particular group. With the help of the Sands, they were forcibly instilled with the ideals that Nergal wanted to impart to them when he built his system. Together, they served one great purpose. Distant and difficult to achieve, but quite real according to Nergal. The transformation will not be fast, but the beginning has been made, and its task is only to ensure that the gears launched by it rotate for a long time, do not fail and do not change their direction.

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Namtar continued to transform into a monster day after day. From time to time, there were repeated failures, and then his mind and body ceased to belong to him. He fell out of reality, and each time the return was more painful, and the failures lasted longer. And outwardly, he became less and less like a person. He was tormented by a premonition of imminent oblivion. Only emptiness awaited him ahead, in which his consciousness would finally dissolve. And he should have found the door and the key as quickly as possible. But what if emptiness awaits him outside the threshold?

It cost him incredible effort to continue working on the diary. Namtar felt that this was still incredibly important. Even stronger than before. After all, he will perish, dissolve in eternity, and his words will at least remain on paper and, perhaps, will still be able to influence something. And he needs to choose them with special care, so that even through the centuries he can reach someone. To preserve the memory of himself was all that was in his power. In a diary or in some objects – it doesn't matter. Or even with the help of a statue, the idea of which he himself considered stupid. The main thing was that all these traces should form a single chain, similar to fate, which he hated, but with which he could no longer find the strength to argue.

Time was now his main enemy. He could still defeat it, having managed to build this last phantom plan. He needs to create several

caches in which he will hide clues and all the most important items: a dagger, a medallion, a diary and a Ring. The sands in them are isolated from those that come from the Abyss, and in the right hands can still be useful. He could not develop the idea of a weapon against Nergal - a sword endowed with the power of water. The sand in him resisted this in every possible way, and Namtar was very afraid that Nergal would see this in his thoughts and then all hope would disappear completely. Like himself.

Only the presence of Jatta helped Namtar not to lose his mind. She, although she was afraid of him and kept at a distance, was still near him almost constantly. At first, he even wanted to pass on all his memory and knowledge to her, but he quickly realized that even for such an unusual dog as her, this was too much. She was a loyal friend, a devoted ally, and a good helper, but she was still an animal. Not even the Sand would be able to awaken the consciousness in her that would be able to cope with Namtar's plan.

Realizing that if it was difficult for him to establish contact even with her, Namtar knew that in millennia no one would understand or hear him at all, no matter what clues he left. He needs something more effective. Or someone. The one who will not be defeated. The one who will not forget. And so he came up with the idea of transferring his consciousness to another body – it almost did not obey him anyway. With the help of the Sand, he will create a Mask that, as soon as it touches the face, absorbs the mind of the wearer and seems to create a second copy of it in time. It seems to divide a person into two unequal parts – the body and soul will exist separately from each other. Moreover, this division does not take place here and now, but in the context of the time allotted to a person by fate. It is not known what will become of the former consciousness, most likely it will simply lose the memory of the existence of the Mask and will not guess anything. And the old will be able to live in this new artificial body and then... He will have a second chance! After all, no one will even guess that there are now two of them. Namtar decided to call it the Mask of the Sand Spirit, because of how weightless and subtle the idea was—he really would be no more than a spirit from the Sand and Memories. But he didn't know what to do, even if he succeeded. Lie low and wait for the right moment? But by the time it comes, maybe more than one thousand years will have passed? Or give yourself away by trying to kill Nergal once again. Perhaps it is worth making a copy very similar to the real self, so that no one understands who is really in front of them.

But, alas, none of these scenarios was destined to come true. The new sandy body began to literally crumble before our eyes minutes after birth. Namtar felt as if his consciousness was divided into two - one half remained in the old body, and the other could not

cling to the new one. Something was getting in his way, and his body was too weak - it required a constant supply of sand. And, literally half an hour later, Namtar stood in front of his own dead body, which turned into a kind of mummy before his eyes, raising his hand in agony, but unable even to get up from his knees. And the dead man's face was covered with the Mask.

Namtar was about to try a few more times, knowing that his idea was viable but needed to be improved, if not for another incident that truly shocked him. Something that had long been predetermined and seemed to be only a matter of time. Nergal had almost written off Namtar himself, but he never stopped worrying about Jatta and trying to find her. He believed that it was not by chance that he was hiding her. And perhaps through her Nergal will be able to get the locket! And after another memory lapse, Namtar discovered her lifeless body. Pain struck his heart like an arrow, causing anger, disgust, and despair in him at the same time. But the latter did not last long. It was as if it had pushed him towards something, and Namtar's mind burned with the same intensity as before, although he felt some change within himself - now ideas were born not in the form of flashes in the darkness, but burned with flames that devoured everything around him and gave birth to new ideas.

Namtar wrote only a brief note in his diary:

They killed Jatta...

But there was much more to this brevity than Namtar had been able to invent in the rest of his life. At that moment, such an insight descended on him, which does not happen to another person even once in a lifetime. Something that opened all the doors for him without keys. Who knew that his victim would turn out to be just like that?

If before all Namtar's thoughts had been nothing but confusion and panic, now they were lined up in a harmonious line. A clear and logical chain. None of his ideas were wrong or unworkable, just... He was just beginning to understand the essence of his nature. It was a pity that it took such a great shock when she literally turned into a calamity and turned against it to feel and begin to understand her. Or was it the Sands that catalyzed this force in him, and without them, Namtar would never have seen it? Like any element, they cannot act fully consciously and rationally. Some events occur simply by inertia, due to the properties of the elements themselves.

Namtar suddenly realized that life is not limited to a certain circle of ideas, such as fate or death. The mask is proof of this, although the idea itself was blind luck. Accidents, of which there are many, and which are an integral part of life. The only thing that

matters is how to dispose of this luck. He did not really believe in a second chance, and he did not succeed in prolonging his fading life with the help of the Mask. But that doesn't mean the idea was stupid or useless. If he could not use it himself, then someone else can.

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Now Namtar knew that his hiding places must be special. The kind that you can't find just by learning about them. Nergal, one way or another, will definitely find them. But he won't look for anything if he finds what Namtar was hiding! He only needs to create the appearance of deception - Nergal's vanity will do its job. He will believe that he has rediscovered Namtar's cunning in advance and will not guess that he was allowed to think so. Namtar no longer shunned such methods - hitting the enemy with his own weapons, on the contrary, seemed to be the only possible option. Nergal is unlikely to guess the hidden properties of what he finds.

After killing Jatta, and even though he did not find the locket, Nergal calmed down for a while. He believed that this would finally finish off Namtar, depriving him of his last hope. Nergal wanted to destroy, crush Namtar with this act. He believed that this would finally knock the rug out from under his feet. But he did not count on the opposite effect. And, of course, he did not attach any importance to what remained in Jatta's memory. After her death, this memory was kept by a locket, and Namtar found something in it. One important memory that helped him move on. And to the one on whom he now pinned his hopes.

This is how his last crazy plan appeared. Ripened in a matter of seconds. One that even Nergal would not be able to figure out. Born of despair, he burned with a flame in his eyes that caused the monster inside to retreat for a moment and fall silent. Namtar felt a change within him, a change in the way he thought and the way his memory worked. All thanks to his true nature. And now he could easily hide his thoughts - the Sands could no longer see them, which meant that Nergal was blind too. But Namtar's time was gone, and he couldn't do anything on his own, and it was foolish, because all this time he had been fighting the wrong thing. He did not even know the real plans of his enemy - Nergal did not intend to live forever. And he called the Great Transfiguration something completely different.

It seems that they are very similar to their son, no matter what. They tried to do more or less the same thing, but with different goals. Namtar understood that the milestone had long been passed and there could be no return to the past. No matter how much he pondered, it seemed to be frozen in stone and no longer amenable to change. But as soon as he mentally crossed this line, he saw

something new. It was only necessary to stop clinging to the past and accept the present. A whole world opened up before him again, countless paths diverging in different directions. There is no fate. And there is no plan, there are only opportunities. And his personal participation in what is happening is not so important, it's not about a specific person. He can only show the way.

Chapter 29. Second chance

I'm becoming a monster. So far, only externally, but headaches and insomnia will soon drive me crazy. The monster is a big hindrance to me. My body is changing – I have become taller and stronger, my skin has darkened and cracked, and some growths have appeared on my body. The old clothes no longer fit me - I walk in a huge shapeless robe with a hood and long sleeves, hiding my face and hands. The sand continues to push me into the abyss of madness every second. And I am in a hurry to finish this diary, no matter how much effort it costs me.

As an outcast, I have to huddle in the caves of the northern part of the Island. Nergal did not succeed in capturing me again, and my new incredible strength helped me. But I can't cope with him either – it's too difficult for me to resist his will. All I have to do is safely hide this diary, the Ring, the Medallion and the Dagger. Without them, Nergal will not be as strong as he would like. They will be found by someone else, pure in soul, and he will not be afraid to challenge Nergal and his army. This is my only hope, otherwise I would have burned this diary as I originally planned. But I still decided to try.

Hope can be an incredibly powerful force. It will help whoever dares to fight the Sands to follow my plan to the very end. He'll follow my path, and he'll start with the locket. I will leave an imprint of it on one of the pages so that my follower will know what he has to find: a small metal disc with a crescent-shaped relief around the edge and a circle in the center. Miraculously, it repeats the shape of the Island as it was in the days of the Masghik – I saw it in my vision – and it is regaining it now. He used the Sands to unite the Isle together, but did not see their true power and started the tradition of throwing stones at the Abyss. Its real meaning is now well understood by me. I decided to do my duty after all, for now I am indeed close to death, and I did my part by throwing the red stone ring into the Abyss. I, like hundreds of Rulers before me, will not be able to fill it up, but that has never been my goal. I just want the Ring of Destiny to be incredibly difficult to find, which is why I threw it into the darkness of Irkalla (as the people of Osakar called the Abyss, believing that it attracts and takes away forever all those who are missing). And only with the help of the medallion that I hid at the bottom of the very first mirrored bowl will my follower be able to summon the Sands from the depths of Ircalla and thus raise the Ring to the surface. And only then will he be ready for the last step - to get the dagger. I do not hide it, but on the contrary, I leave it in the most visible place, in the Central Hall, where Nergal wounded me. But I discovered a wonderful feature of the Sands - with their help, an object can be as if in two places at the same time. But in none of them will it be

material. I don't know for sure whether this is a joke of Fate or some other unexplored property of the Sands. However, I find it ingenious to hide the object, leaving it in plain sight, but hiding the method that will allow you to take it in your hands. The dagger, divided in two, will lie at the two opposite exits from the hall, but it will be possible to take it in your hands... however, the Ring will tell it himself, better than I. With a dagger, you can gain unlimited power, or you can finish what I failed to do and kill Nergal. By then, he is unlikely to look like a human anymore, so as soon as the dagger draws all the Sand out of him, he will die.

The power of a dagger depends on who holds it. He can both take away life and give a new one. Nergal would be able to transform into Zervan almost instantly, without long and careful preparation. The desire, the will of the possessor is enough to direct it and make it act.

In addition, I have left a secret passage between the Abyss and the throne room. By imbuing the medallion and dagger with the power of the Sands, my follower will be able to transport himself to Nergal's chambers in the blink of an eye, taking him by surprise and dispatching him. that are located above the Abyss and in the throne room, near the Hourglass. It is enough just to put your will into it and all boundaries will be erased. ***And I'll stay away so as not to draw attention to the hiding places.***

All this time, Nergal will only have to be content with his staff, which is dangerous in its own way, but not powerful enough. He can only command mirrored cups, but the Clock is hardly under his control. And Nergal will inevitably follow the path of impregnating his body with the Sands - this will give him imaginary power, but will make him extremely vulnerable. My plan is strange and confused, but it will pass the test of time and will not fall apart like all the previous ones. It is predestined by Fate itself!

Namtar's Diary, Entry 92

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The ghost found all the answers in the past. He went with Namtar all the way, from beginning to end, living some segments of time even several times. He could easily step beyond time at any moment and stare at a moment for as long as he wanted. To study and ponder, finding the truth. After all, everything has its reasons, stems from something, although it may not be obvious at first glance. But before that, the Ghost was in too much of a hurry to keep up with the course of events, although he did not need to.

When he returned to the Prince, there was no point in him running away, hurrying somewhere, or worrying. Now the Ghost understood everything. He saw through time, he could grasp the entire web of events and his place in it with one glance. He finally came to the realization that he had no place in people's lives at all. He is an observer who does not live according to the laws of the ordinary world. But he could learn about this world, penetrating into its innermost secrets. And the future was finally open to him, as well as the past. It seems that he managed to throw off the last shackles from his consciousness.

All the lines, intricately intertwined, suddenly merged into one. The ghost realized (and even became convinced) that if fate exists, it is not at all in the form in which people imagined it. Fate is like the flow of a river. There is no denying its existence, but it can be fought even if it rebels, overflows, and becomes a stormy ocean. Fate is not an absolute. It is not set in stone and cannot be known to anyone. And the timeline is also arranged differently - it may be known to the Sands and they try to keep it in this state, but only until it is rewritten. And then the new line completely replaces the old one. There are no other realities – time does not branch on every choice made by a person (and it would be too self-confident to think otherwise). Only memories of what the events were like before they were rewritten in the timeline remain, accessible only to Trespassers like the Prince. No one else will even suspect what happened, that everything could have been somehow different.

But, every small and accidental intervention was not able to change the timeline once and for all. It did not grow into an avalanche, but on the contrary, quickly faded in time, healed like a small wound and the effect was very insignificant. The impact must be really significant, weighty in order to influence the course of history. And this was the main difficulty - no one knew how strong it should be. How far do you have to go in this struggle, what trials do you have to put yourself through in order to succeed?

The ghost deliberately missed the last few hours of the Prince's life as he wandered through the maze and came across a message left by Namtar. He knew perfectly well everything that would happen to the Prince in those moments. Everything went exactly according to plan. And even if the Ghost had been watching him, he wouldn't have interfered. He was quite aware of what the Prince only vaguely guessed, but was afraid to even think (much less say it out loud): Dahaka was leading the Prince through this labyrinth. And the Ghost had nothing to do with it.

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The noose closed. The prince became what he considered his enemy most of the time. But a few minutes ago, he could not even imagine such a turn of events. He considered the Being to be anything – a lost soul, an escaped prisoner – but not himself.

"It didn't try to kill me! Rather, it wanted to warn or even direct...", the Prince reflected.

He suddenly remembered that Namtar had not called him a Being in a vision, but a Sand Spirit. And little by little, listening to his feelings, the Prince understood why. His consciousness was as if torn out of his body. It was as if he had voluntarily gone to this little death, becoming a spirit, but the locket helped him stay in the world of the living, stopping him from running against the tide of time and giving him another body that was fueled by the Sands. It was a product of this powerful element and consisted entirely of them! And this trick, performed on the verge of life and death, allowed him to travel back in time almost a whole day. Now, in the present, it didn't make much sense, but if he went through the portal, to the past, he would again be in a time when the Sands had not yet been created, and Kaileena would be alive. Dahaka will not pursue him again at least in one of the times.

Oh, how the Prince hated him now! How far he had to go to get rid of his formidable breath behind him. And, even now, there was still nothing to guarantee success. On the contrary, the Prince had already seen his death with his own eyes. Now it was to be seen by his double, the Prince who had just arrived on the Island and had taken refuge in a cave for the night, if he could not find a way to break this vicious circle.

'I wonder if this is happening so many times?' thought the Spirit Prince. "What if I've been running around for ages in this noose, which over and over again, invariably, is tightened by a noose around my neck? Quite! I allowed Dahaka to literally control me, submitting to the fear of being caught, losing my life and everything I held dear! Now I only feel anger! Rage gives me strength, I will fight fate until my last breath! I will destroy Kaileena in my time and finally gain freedom!"

Such a determined attitude really helped the Spirit Prince, because the pain he felt at the moment of transformation did not go away. She became weaker, but she was still literally tearing him apart. It seems that this strange body that the Sands gave him was weakening by the second, and was very short-lived. The only thing that kept him alive was the Sand pouring from the locket. This one, unlike the fake one, was extremely powerful, but it was not known how long its strength would last, so the Spirit Prince had to find a way out of the labyrinth of caves as soon as possible. And it turned out to be incredibly difficult. The night was moonless, and there was

absolutely no light in the cave! He groped his way, trying to remember something of Namtar's vision and winding path. The medallion, whose powers were entirely devoted to maintaining life in the Prince's new body, stubbornly remained silent, not helping him in any way in his search.

The prince wandered in absolute darkness, constantly feeling the road ahead and moving extremely slowly. There was no way he could speed up, for fear of stumbling and falling into the crevice. He had to touch the wall with his hand all the time to have at least some landmark. The darkness had engulfed not only his body, but also his mind. His thoughts were gloomy and anxious. He felt a chill of loneliness. Now he was torn out of life, like a slice of meat that a predator had torn out of its prey with its sharp fangs. Blood dripped from this piece, and the fangs of the beast pressed harder and harder on it, squeezing out the last grains of life. Why does he need this strange gift at all? What can he do with this fading body that will last a day at most?

His only weapon was stealth. No one and nothing knew about his existence, the Mask seemed to hide him from the gaze of fate. The Spirit Prince even hoped that Dahaka would stop chasing him altogether. What if he found a way to get into the throne room before his doppelgänger, and then forced Kaileena to go to the present, where he could get rid of her? But what's next? How can he get his body back? And is it even possible?

Despite all these questions, the medallion was still silent. Time was playing against the Spirit Prince, who had been wandering in the dark for hours in a row, and had not seen a ray of light or any hint of coming to the surface. Why does he need this life at all if he cannot live it? He constantly imagined Dahaki's angry roar, and only darkness appeared before his eyes. His body only gave him endless pain, but would it become stronger if the enemy hit him with a weapon? And what is the point of movement if it only reminds him that time is inexorably moving forward?

The prince stopped and closed his eyes. No matter how much he peered into the darkness, he could not distinguish the outlines of the cavern vaults. He could not even see his hands or feet. He himself became part of this darkness! Unlike Namtar, who in his vision looked like a large bright spot, barely resembling the outlines of a person. The prince no longer remembered that Namtar was dressed in a long robe - his memories were changing, something from the outside was pouring into them... Medallion! The prince finally found his way to his memory and, afraid to miss this thin, weightless thread, turned his back to the front and, still without opening his eyes, walked backwards, mentally repeating in his mind the vision in which Namtar led him to the Mask.

When the Prince finally left the cave, it was early in the morning. It seems that around this time, he and his team got out of hiding, and together they began to look for the entrance to the fortress. The Spirit Prince didn't have much time left to put his plan into reality and prevent the Spirit Prince from making a mistake again!

After that, he began to run, still partially guided by his vision. He hoped to get back to the library through the old part of the fortress, and from there to the throne room, finding a time portal or another bubble on the way, returning to the past with its help. A chain of happy accidents was all he could count on now.

Panting, constantly feeling bouts of nausea, the Spirit Prince ran as fast as he could. And there were fewer and fewer of them, it seemed that he was about to become nothing, lose all his flesh and crumble to dust. He tried as best he could not to pay attention to this. "In time, in time, in time!" - swirled in his head. This moved him forward – not just a desire, but a vital need to do the impossible, to overcome the insurmountable. Running has now become the meaning of his life. Otherwise, it is death. The most terrible of all. The same one that literally appeared in front of him in a moment, literally a few steps away, as if out of nowhere. Dahaka knew how to present unpleasant surprises and appear at the most inopportune moment: the Spirit Prince was approaching the gate through which he had left the library the last time the monster suddenly broke through it from the inside and crashed out. But Dahaka did not notice him, and the Spirit Prince managed to hide to the side of him, behind a high stone railing. The passage was closed, and the monster did not even think of moving, as if it knew that the Spirit Prince was somewhere nearby and was waiting for him. Realizing that his plan was not destined to come true, he cautiously and very quietly began to move towards another passage, crudely carved into the rock. He carefully stepped over all the small stones and tried not to make a sound at all. It was betrayed only by the glow that came from nowhere, emanating from the medallion. But the fatal accident again played a cruel joke on him - he frightened off some animal, and with a nasty squeak it rushed to the side. Within a moment, Dahaki's eyes were fixed on him, as if he could see him even through the stone.

The Spirit Prince suddenly felt that his feelings had betrayed him, and instead of rage or at least fear, he felt cynical indifference to what was happening. He was incredibly tired of all this, events were twisting so much that he was already confused and lost, his goal was becoming vague, but not approaching in any way. All this turned into some kind of absurd strange dream, twisted in a spiral and it was time to go completely crazy. Once again, fate was not so blind, and the Mask did not hide the Spirit Prince from her gaze at all. But he

was not a mistake at all - many times, sometimes miraculously, he escaped from the chase. And this time, with a grin in his voice, he threw to his pursuer:

"Come on, try to catch me!"

And immediately he rushed to the old, half-collapsed bridge, behind which there was a high arch, cut with incomprehensible symbols and seemed older than anything the Prince had seen before. It slanted and part of the base went underground.

Before he could cross the bridge, the Spirit Prince felt it crumble from the weight of Dahaki's stepping onto it. The pursued man rushed forward with all his might and grabbed the ledge, hanging on the edge. The monster collapsed into the abyss under the bridge.

"Die, you creature!" The Prince shouted irritably.

At any other moment, he would most likely have been elated, but right now, he had no doubt that it would only delay Dahaka for a while, but it wouldn't hurt him in any way. At the same moment, the monster released its tentacles in an attempt to grab the Spirit Prince. He, almost reflexively, grabbed his sword and slashed at one of them with all his strength. It helped him, but he didn't remember going upstairs and the next few minutes passed as if into oblivion. The scorching cold literally shackled the mind of the Spirit Prince. He pierced him through, scratching his throat, twisting his arms and legs. Somehow he got up and walked away. Fighting Dahaka with a weapon definitely didn't bode well if he felt it even after a single sword strike!

After passing through the arch, the Spirit Prince found himself inside another cave. It was littered with stones, its walls were covered with incomprehensible symbols, and most of the pictograms depicted a mountain and a star shining above it. Often you could see the figure of a man circled nearby. Many images, even when carved in stone, were illegible. Time destroyed this place for an incredibly long time and it seemed amazing that at least some outlines of its original appearance were preserved.

As the Spirit Prince made his way through the rubble, he began to think again. His plan failed and he could not return to it - the bridge collapsed. And was there any point in it? A second chance, if it really was, was not a thing to be disposed of so lightly. He felt that he was missing something again, not seeing the big picture. Namtar's plan, who had died a thousand years before Kaileena, worked even after such a huge period of time, in the present, in the time of the Prince. But what was it?

The Spirit Prince understood that he had already made a mistake once and fate would find a way to prevent him a second time. He should have fought not with the consequences, but with the root

causes. Otherwise, everything will simply repeat itself. Again and again, again and again. He had to find the source of all events. What was the beginning of this whole nightmare, which through the ages stretched out its cold hands to the Prince's neck, trying to curl it?

In a way, Namtar had deceived the Prince. His visions showed something different. But if he had known the whole truth beforehand, would he have taken such a risk? An almost voluntary death that had made him a spirit devoid of ordinary flesh, with a body woven of Sand that was rapidly weakening and almost as ugly as Dahaka himself. But once on the other side, the Spirit Prince had a different view of everything that was happening. He felt that he even had a kind of choice – to fight in the usual way or to look for something more that would allow him to wedge himself into the events at a point that was really a turning point in this whole story.

And at that moment a simple and even obvious thought occurred to him, which he had hitherto discarded and had not even thought of admitting such a possibility. Opportunities to make a sacrifice. Fearlessly rush towards something like death, voluntarily parting with all hope, with everything that could help him. To voluntarily part with his life, which is almost gone, but only by doing something important. Something that neither Namtar nor Ajit could do.

In fact, the Prince had accepted this idea a long time ago. At the very moment when he had just put on the Mask. Even then, he realized that without sacrifice he would not achieve the result. And only the one who is not afraid of death, having lost everything, is able to win. Or even deserves at least a chance for it. This thought became his passport to the strange new reality in which he found himself.

Only then did the locket speak to the Spirit Prince again in the language of visions, relaying the next part of the message. But it was about something completely different. Willingness to sacrifice was only a kind of key to this knowledge. The mystery that drew some strange, foggy images in the mind of the Spirit Prince. This time there were no faces or voices among them. He saw only two colossi in front of him, two huge towers in which a powerful power was contained. It was as if it were divided in half, and therefore slumbered until someone found the two halves and united them.

The vision was very ambiguous, difficult to interpret and understand. And its final part painted a picture of the destruction of something even greater and huge. It collapsed under the blows of this great awakened force and sank to the bottom of the sea, which swallowed and pacified it. Or even killed.

In an attempt to concentrate and peer into the images that the locket drew in his imagination, the Spirit Prince even stopped. And even though the visions themselves did not become clearer, he understood better the nature of what they were talking about. Half of

the power that was contained in one of the towers resembled a kind of key that allowed the power contained in the other tower to be released. As if it was imprisoned behind some door, a lock that could only be opened by this key. But time after time, when the Spirit Prince almost managed to grasp the essence of the vision and get as close to understanding it as possible, it slipped away, erased like a trail on the shore from a tidal wave.

The Spirit Prince did not notice how he reached the exit of the ancient caves. Or rather, the breach in the wall was not a way out in the full sense of the word, but it led inside the fortress. Probably, once upon a time, these walls were erected to protect the fortress from these ruins. A long corridor ran from the exit in opposite directions - the Spirit Prince chose a direction at random and walked along it. Soon he noticed that these places were strangely familiar to him and he recognized the outlines of the ruins as a hall with a sacrificial altar. Rejoicing at the find, the Spirit Prince hurried to reach the portal and return to the past. Furthermore, he couldn't wait to test the medallion to fully understand how special it was. And although traveling back in time was no different from all the previous ones, the Spirit Prince had no doubt that there were many more secrets hidden in the medallion. Namtar had somehow managed to tame the Sands within him, stripping them of their own will and turning them into tools. Into the megaphone of his own will, as if he could put a part of his consciousness into this small disk. And so the Prince did not feel the immediate threat from him that he felt from the fake locket. It was used by the Empress to harm the Prince, being an instrument of her insidious plans and atrocities. And the strangest thing is that the Spirit Prince did not feel the cold that would emanate from the locket, even when it emitted a mysterious yellow glow during Dahaki's next chase.

Leaving the hall with a portal (the entrance was hidden behind a wall, which created the illusion of a closed door and once confused him), the Spirit Prince found himself in front of the altar. He saw the dagger lying in its usual place. There was no one around. The Spirit Prince stepped closer, hoping to take the dagger in his hands with the locket - then he could get rid of it and prevent the Empress from creating the Sands, or at least delay her. But all his attempts were still in vain.

Suddenly, something happened that instantly ruined all his plans: the Spirit Prince saw Kaileena climbing the stairs. And she saw him.

"Who are you?!" Kailina asked with genuine surprise. She had never encountered such creatures before, which only increased her reaction.

The Spirit Prince was taken aback by the surprise and stepped back a couple of steps. Due to his own carelessness, he was exposed. So ridiculous, stupid! He should have slipped into the shadows and waited, watching the entrance to the hall. It was absolutely pointless to hope to get his hands on the dagger—it was magic that was beyond his reach, and he had to give up trying. Over and over again, he should pass by...

And then the Spirit Prince felt a strange, long-forgotten feeling, when reality seemed to be drowned out, faded, and a second later it flashed with a new bright flash. But a few moments before that. This locket had the ability to turn back time, just like the dagger! Even if only for a short time, he captured the moment when he had not yet been noticed and hurried to take cover to watch Kaileena unnoticed. She had no idea about anything, and the Spirit Prince hoped to understand how to get hold of the dagger.

He was seized with delight. This medallion is really special, and now it is quite obvious why Namtar hid it so diligently - after all, it is capable of deceiving even the Empress of Time herself! Or any other Guardian. It was as if he had rewritten the last few seconds, and only memories remained of the sudden and completely inappropriate meeting. And they belonged only to him, he was free not to share them with anyone.

From his hiding place, the Spirit Prince watched as Kaileena performed some strange rituals, summoning the Sands from the abyss beneath the altar. She swirled them in a whirlwind, now bringing him closer, then pushing him away from her. She did all this with a dagger. Then, as she put it back in its place, hurried footsteps were heard from the direction of the stairs. A few moments later, Shadi appeared. The Spirit Prince felt a wave of indignation at her mere presence.

"Forgive me, my Empress," Shadi said dejectedly.

Kaileena turned to her with a haughty and displeased look, replying:

"Do you mean that he did reach the Island?"

–Yes. Worse still, he followed me through one of the portals. Now he is here, in our time...," Shadi replied even more confused.

"And you have the guts to stand in front of me, admitting your own defeat?!" Kaileena was indignant.

"We defeated them at sea. But he somehow managed to survive. And he turned out to be too good a fighter - I barely escaped my legs! Shadi continued the story.

"Did you run away?" You should have protected me even at the cost of your life! Kaileena blurted out, almost shouting.

"I said from the beginning that this was a stupid idea! Shadi replied suddenly, decisively.

As soon as she could finish, Kaileena slapped her in the face, with such force that Shadi almost fell from surprise - she staggered to the side. After a moment, she looked up with anger at the Empress, who was saying:

"Are you back to your own again?" And these pathetic excuses... That's not what I sent you for!

"You sent me to certain death, but for what?" The timeline cannot be changed! Shadi replied with resentment in her voice.

–Shut up! Do better what you have to do! Kaileena said contemptuously.

"As you wish, my Empress!" Shadi scolded.

"What is the tone?" Kailina was indignant. –I don't...

But before she could finish speaking, Shadi rushed at her with a weapon. Obviously, she wanted to solve the problem in her own way, with the help of brute force.

"After all I've done for you?!" How dare you? Kaileena wheezed, resisting.

The Spirit Prince realized that he already knew how this fight would end and hurried away. Kaileena's last words made him think for a moment: even though he had found out that they were not sisters, they still had something in common. Shadi owes something to Kaileena, but even that couldn't change her mind about how reckless and stupid it was to change her fate. And for this purpose, Caileena was ready to do anything. Just like himself - it seems that they are not so different.

Creeping along one of the balconies to the exit from the hall, the Spirit Prince closed the passage behind him and saw... themselves. He had long understood that sooner or later, one way or another, he would have to face himself, the Unmasked Prince, or the Double Prince, as he called him, in his familiar guise. But he did not think that everything would repeat itself literally, second by second. Every little detail, including their brief eye meeting, went as if according to a pre-written script. Fate turned his whole life into one long narrow corridor, where the light of hope did not even break through, and all the turns were determined in advance. So was it worth it for him to try to change anything in this labyrinth of events? In addition, he never had a chance to talk to himself, except for this strange dialogue in the language of actions.

Soon, the Spirit Prince had another thought: should he change anything in the fate of his doppelgänger at all, trying to interfere and look for all kinds of loopholes? What if something goes wrong and he dies? Then he himself will be gone. The noose will be broken, and this will finally destroy him! Maybe it is really better for him to listen to the advice that he has already given once, albeit in a very peculiar way?

But the locket told him about some other path. About the path hidden in the fog - until he is close to the goal, he will not be able to understand it. However, even if it was completely accidental, he was able to use its power to correct a small part of the recent events, completely unnoticed by the rest. Or is it also part of fate? Is it really so complex that some events can occur only if some of them are rewritten with the help of such interventions? It turns out that the intervention itself is also predetermined by the timeline?

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The ghost, unlike the Spirit Prince, already knew the answers to all the questions and saw the whole picture. It was more complex than it seemed to the Spirit Prince, but it was not like a vicious circle, but rather like a loop-like line that went in coils and crossed itself. He knew that in fact, this was not the Prince's second chance, but in a way, the fourth. The first Prince who arrived on the Island never met the Creature or encountered it until he became one himself, and the Ghost did not interfere in his fate either. The first Prince's path through the Island looked a little different, and he fought Kaileena right next to the cage in the Garden. He didn't throw away the locket in the Mechanical Tower because he wasn't a trapped Being. And thinking that everything was going exactly according to plan, Caileena decided to fight him right in the Garden, at the place of her false imprisonment. But the First Prince also overpowered her and hurried to get rid of the locket, throwing it nearby. That was the first time he made a fatal mistake - he killed Kaileena and gave birth to the Sands of Time. Dahaka then caught up with him at some point, and it ended with the First Prince, having never met Ajit, discovering the true locket and the Mask. The appearance of the first Spirit Prince gave birth to a second Prince, a double, the one he had been the day before, and whose fate had already been interfered with by the Ghost, and then by the first Spirit Prince himself. But the latter died, and history repeated itself - the second Prince found the Mask and became the second Spirit Prince, whom the Ghost was now watching. And his appearance gave birth to the third Prince, another double, whose fate was to develop in a different way from the first two. He was met by the second Spirit Prince a moment ago at the entrance to the hall with the altar.

The First Spirit Prince was aware of the danger of the fake locket and the fact that Kaileena was using it to cloud the second Prince's mind, just as she had once done to the first. That is why he, seizing the right moment, locked the Prince in a trap and forced him to get rid of him. This also delayed (but did not cancel in the end) his battle with Kaileena. She was frightened and surprised, and made a

last-ditch attempt to hide behind the doors of the throne room, faking her own death. Immediately after this false sacrifice, the second Prince discovered a fake locket left behind by the first Prince and as he thought it was a happy coincidence that he was able to get into the throne room. But it turned out that he voluntarily fled into the arms of death. The First Spirit Prince hoped that the Second Prince would achieve more than he had ever done, and so he helped him in every possible way. But, as it turned out, in vain - history repeated itself, despite minor differences in details.

Each successive Prince, in both guises, over and over again rewrote the events of the timeline. But his vision was limited, and even with the help of the false locket he was able to see little: only what was happening to himself, not to his doubles or second appearance. Therefore, he had no idea that over and over again he lived through a segment of an already changed, rewritten timeline, the starting and ending points of which, in fact, remained unchanged. However, the Second Prince was able to use even such limited opportunities to his advantage and managed to change his past in the Mechanical Tower, freeing himself from the trap in the Garden in the future. And until recently, only the Ghost was able to see all these intricacies of events. But he already knew that it would not be long before the second Spirit Prince would guess everything. A real locket revealed to him the truth that the first Spirit Prince was unable to see. He simply did not have an example to follow. But the second one managed to see enough for certain conclusions to begin to suggest themselves. And the medallion will help him in finding the right answers. He turned the timeline into a spider's web, albeit woven from memories and visions. The true medallion knew about all possible scenarios, especially those that had already really happened, but had been rewritten. And now it was clear why Namtar had hidden the real locket so carefully. But will the Spirit Prince be able to understand where the line is between the real past and someone else's memory? Or will another round be required?

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The locket gave the Spirit Prince only the answers he was ready for. The knowledge and opportunities that he really desired. But there were many things he could not even think of. His mind was completely occupied with the ability to manipulate time at will, albeit on such a small scale. Often this was quite enough, because just one moment sometimes made all the difference. But was this the only thing that mattered?

Perhaps fear also stopped him. In front of the unknown and the abyss of possibilities of knowledge that could drive him crazy. A person who has realized the limits of his mind in comparison with infinity will hardly be able to remain the same person. And it will be even worse if these boundaries fall. Most likely, it will be destroyed, crushed by this block. Therefore, the Spirit Prince viewed the medallion more as a kind of useful tool or device, seeking answers as needed. He saw his main tasks as finding the key from the vision and preserving the life of his double. At the same time, he knew that it was better for him not to interfere in Kaileena's affairs - this could disrupt the entire course of events and lead to unpredictable consequences. A web of all possible scenarios (by no means the most favorable) for the development of events flashed in the mind of the Spirit Prince in separate fragments, incoherent and incomprehensible, but no less frightening. Sometimes it even seemed to him that taking one step forward, he then made many more in different directions and with different intentions, as if spreading along this web. And each time he needed an effort to concentrate and keep his sanity. He did not want to see all this diversity, it was enough for him to know that it existed, and he could influence it at will, choosing and re-choosing the path.

The rewriting of events, even if it was so small, led the Spirit Prince to another interesting observation: only the one who made the substitution knew about it. Therefore, any other person will not even guess that he is living through this moment not for the first time. And the most interesting thing was that he himself could not have known about the substitution: his double could have done something like this, and despite the fact that the Spirit Prince knew about such a possibility, he could not determine the moment when the events were not rewritten by himself. What if in this labyrinth, where truth is indistinguishable from lies, he misses something important? Something that he will see, be able to discern in the whirlwind of what is happening, but then be forced to forget?

The Spirit Prince's thoughts were distracted by the light of the locket that suddenly flashed on his chest. The bright yellow light it was emitting was saying something, but it took him a few more seconds to figure out what it was. And before he could remember the last time he had seen that glow, the Spirit Prince heard Dahaki's heavy footsteps somewhere nearby. Obviously, the monster was following the Spirit Prince and it didn't matter to him that he was in the past - he was a troublemaker of the timeline and had no place in this world at all. Therefore, the personification of fate pursued him always and everywhere. But how does he manage to find the Spirit Prince so easily and quickly? What betrays him and shows the monster the way?

The Spirit Prince slid into the nearest narrow passage and hid in the shadows, watching what happened next, covering the light of the locket with his palm. Dahaka appeared just moments later, glancing around fiercely. He evidently sensed the presence of the intruder, but he could not detect him. And then the Spirit Prince, finding himself in a dead end with a locked door, realized that the best way to hide from the beast would be to constantly jump from the past to the present and back again - this would confuse him at least a little and make him run after him. Apparently, Namtar once came to the same conclusion, creating that strange labyrinth with alternating time. Now the Spirit Prince was beginning to understand his plan, and even felt a semblance of hope again. But all this, at the same time, was overshadowed by doubts, a lack of understanding of why Namtar used the thing that attracts Dahaki's attention? It is unlikely that he did this deliberately, most likely, this is one of the properties of the medallion that he had to put up with. But was there no other way?

Meanwhile, the beast, not reaching its goal, vanished into thin air, disappearing in front of the astonished Spirit Prince. The presence of the monster weighed on him immensely, and it seemed as if every second dragged on for an eternity. But then the light of the locket faded, and the Spirit Prince felt relatively safe again, but the mere hunch that had suddenly come to him shattered that feeling. What if he went to look for it in the present? In that case, all his moving back and forth didn't make much sense. In addition, the Prince always needed portals for this, and the beast did it of his own free will. Time was nothing more than a wall for him that he could destroy with one powerful blow. And only this wall separated the past from the present. Realizing this, the Spirit Prince hurried to leave his precarious hiding place and leave this place before Dahaka decided to return. Finally, he saw Kaileena come out of the hall with the altar and close the entrance to it. This time, she didn't notice the Spirit Prince, and she was probably only thinking about how to take refuge in the throne room as soon as possible. Even after handing him a fake locket that would soon cloud the Prince's mind, she was afraid of the stranger. She was afraid of her fate, just like he was afraid of herself. Each of the Princes and his doubles. And she did whatever it took to avoid what the timeline predicted. The Spirit Prince even imagined for a moment how she would send Shadi in a desperate attempt to get rid of him even before arriving on the Island. How desperate her eyes burn, and how angry she is at Shadi's resistance to the Empress's will and her own impotence. It turns out that they are not so different from each other? Simply, by a cruel joke of fate, they found themselves on different sides of this struggle.

After ten minutes of wandering through the deserted corridors and halls of the fortress, the Spirit Prince found himself on a balcony

that led to a transition between the fortress and the tower, which seemed familiar to him. When he reached it, he realized that he had entered the Watchtower, the place where he had first discovered the time portal. This encouraged him - from a familiar place he could easily get to one of the Towers. The Spirit Prince came to the conclusion that the colossi in his vision were the Mechanical Tower and the Garden (it, by and large, was also made in the form of a tower - tier by tier, it rushed higher and higher). They were separated in space, but the Prince felt a strange connection between them. Perhaps it was born back when he was transported from the Gardens to the Mechanical Tower with the help of a medallion and relived part of his life. Or perhaps this bifurcation was due to this mysterious connection between them, as if they were part of something unified. All he had to do was find the key, and then find the right door to finally understand what power lay behind it. But first, he had to find his way down—he was at the very top of the Watchtower.

But this was again prevented by Dahaka. The Spirit Prince did not see or hear - he felt his presence. The beast was somewhere nearby, the air seemed to thicken and become scorching cold. There was no longer any doubt - the locket attracted him, not even allowing the Spirit Prince to catch his breath. Death was waiting for him around every corner, and even when he was hiding, he seemed to continue to call her to him at the top of his voice. But it was a necessary price, the only possible way to stay alive – to balance on the brink of life and death. After all, without the locket, he would most likely lose his ugly, worthless body and cease to exist.

Guessing where his enemy would come from, the Spirit Prince hurried to change his route and chose a long, less obvious, but safer path. Soon he found himself at the foot of the Watchtower, but not from the direction from which he had originally planned. He had to make his way through the barracks, shadowing along the massive stone walls and dimly lit corridors. Dahaki's presence turned into an unpleasant memory - the beast disappeared again, never finding its victim. After a few more minutes, the Spirit Prince finally managed to get into the Watchtower. He stopped sneaking and hiding, but continued to behave with caution. Any of his enemies was dangerous primarily because of their suddenness, and he couldn't afford to be weak. But he did not meet an enemy at all.

The Spirit Prince slowed down and began to walk. When he reached the grate—it was the height of the entire wall and quite long—he stopped one step away from it. Peering behind her, he saw the Double Prince. This meeting surprised both of them - the Spirit Prince had already forgotten this episode from his past. Besides, he hadn't expected the Double Prince to get here so quickly, he

remembered how long it had taken him to make his way through the ruined ceremonial hall. And then he met Dahaka twice, which caused a lot of trouble then. At least an hour must have passed! But, contrary to all expectations, his doppelgänger was already here and running towards his goal, distracted for a while by a strange encounter. The Spirit Prince saw the surprise and curiosity in his eyes. He remembered them well, because they were his own. But the Spirit Prince did not want to drag out a moment, confusing the double, and wasting his time, so he decided to hide, deceiving him. Rushing forward, he hid behind the wall against which the grate rested, and the doppelgänger who ran out of the Tower did not see him, believing that the Creature had already managed to hide.

After catching his breath, the Spirit Prince listened and heard the sounds of battle. It seemed that his doppelgänger was busy right now, and he could take advantage of this to cross the bridge and actually escape. To try to explain anything to your double or to make him understand too much would be too dangerous.

Crouching, the Spirit Prince emerged from his hiding place and only glanced at what was happening. But this was enough to notice that the Prince Double, who was fighting the illusion, was resolutely oblivious to the real danger. It was an astonishing folly that death crept up from behind him, and he, overcoming the mirage, stood and looked at the Spirit Prince. The invisible behind the doppelgänger was betrayed only by a pair of orange eyes and a shiny narrow blade that floated through the air. Realizing that there was nothing he could do, the Spirit Prince used the medallion to go back in time for a few moments. It was enough for him to grab the axe from the nearby weapon rack in time and throw it at the sneaking enemy.

The Spirit Prince found himself on the other side of things and did what he had seen before. But why? Is it because he saw it or because he had to? Or should he because he saw it? Originally, he didn't intend to do anything like that, because he had even forgotten about this incident. But now the Spirit Prince knew that he had made the only right decision. And he was sure that the Prince Double would react in the same way as he had once reacted. In his eyes, there was a familiar anger and now there was certainly no hope of agreeing on anything with his double.

'I saved my own life and didn't even realize it!' thought the Spirit Prince. For the first time in a long time, he clarified something for himself and the questions did not multiply, but, on the contrary, disappeared. And, unlike the newly-arrived double, he was aware that the Being had never been his enemy.

Just a moment later, a new hunch came to him, which gave the Spirit Prince a few more answers. Their destinies (his and the double's) were not just connected, they were as if mirrored in the

timeline. And what influenced one inevitably influenced the other. This, for example, perfectly explained how Dahaka constantly found the Prince with such ease and enviable constancy when he returned to the present. It was all about the Spirit Prince and the true medallion that attracted the beast. Somehow, he managed to avoid such encounters, but if there was a doppelgänger Prince nearby, it was as if the Spirit Prince himself had brought Dahaka to him. And this revealed the full picture to the Spirit Prince. He was, as it were, a reflection of the Prince-Double and was the very complement to the whole. Two elements entangled in the thread of time, they depended on each other and were something single and indivisible. And they were inevitably attracted to each other.

But the Prince Spirit explained such a quick appearance of the double in a different way - when he jumped in the present, the past seemed to freeze. The Prince Double could stay in the present for hours, whereas for the Spirit Prince, who remained in the past, not a moment passed. It was as if the Prince Double had simply taken a shortcut. And he did it deliberately, wanting to delay the creation of the Sands of Time.

Only now did the Spirit Prince begin to grasp the full scale of the events that were taking place, their complexity and intricacy. The web that his imagination drew before him was beyond his knowledge, and he could hardly comprehend all its secrets on his own. But he had the right tool; The key, if not to understand it, then at least to know it. But how much did he not even guess about? This question came to him for the first time, but it marked the point of no return - he began to realize how far he would have to go in this knowledge. And now it's time to ask questions again.

Suddenly, somewhere ahead, the Spirit Prince heard shouts and the clashing of swords. He ran forward and saw Naveed, Toufan and Rahim fighting. They are alive! And they somehow ended up in the past! But there are so few of them... The Spirit Prince could barely resist calling them out or rushing into battle. However, it was dangerous to give yourself away. He had to find another way to help them: the surviving members of the team fought off the pursuing enemy squad on the run, to whom they were significantly inferior in strength and numbers. And he couldn't think of anything better than to cut off his pursuers from his friends by cutting the rope that kept the massive lattice door open. The Spirit Prince made a slight mistake and she collapsed to the floor so that one of the sand soldiers managed to run after the team, and another was crushed by it. But they at least had a chance to cope with one enemy; the rest remained cut off and gave up the pursuit. The Spirit Prince hurried to leave this place secretly, but in the next hall, he realized that he had made a mistake.

He saw Iman wandering in confusion towards the armed squad. But it seemed that he did not care at all, his gaze was detached, he constantly stopped, muttered something to himself and seemed to have no understanding of what was happening. And then the Spirit Prince guessed that he had most likely suffered the fate of Haraz. He had lost his mind and will, and was only a shadow of the man he once was. But at least he had achieved the goal he had sought: to end the life of a soldier, to leave the war, and to find peace. Unfortunately, however, he was hardly aware of this.

After a moment's hesitation, the Spirit Prince cut another rope, separating Iman from the enemy squad just in case. But he could do nothing more for the poor man, and hurried away. He had no time for regret and pity. Iman, in turn, did not even react to the crash with which the massive lattice door hit the floor.

The part of the fortress in which the Spirit Prince was now located was carved directly into the rock and connected to the outer wall of the fortress. Once outside, he looked around and continued along it. The Spirit Prince decided to stay away from the doppelgänger and find another way to one of the Towers. Rounding the sharp promontory, he found a small shipyard and a pier built in the bay that opened to his eyes. Getting closer, the Spirit Prince looked around intently. He had a vague premonition that told him that he might meet someone else from the team. But, alas, he did not find anyone from his squad.

The Spirit Prince suddenly wondered how the Empress managed to transfer in time not only her servants, but also entire ships? Did she build a giant portal for this? Such a version seemed completely unrealistic to him, even by the standards of everything he had already encountered. Most likely, even she could not do it. Moreover, as the Spirit Prince managed to understand from Namtar's diary, Kaileen rather used the achievements of previous generations and was not able to bring anything of her own to this list. Her only merit, so to speak, would be the Sands of Time in their final form. And it is unlikely that the idea itself belonged to her personally. It was only the completion of a centuries-old cycle that had begun long before its birth. Still, it was absolutely impossible to argue that there, at sea, the Prince and his crew had encountered an enemy ship. This means that Kailina approached this issue in a similar way, using other people's ideas. She was likely inspired by the Ajit Chamber, which brought time to a standstill, and used the power of the Sands to imbue the materials from which the ships were made with resistance to time and seawater. And it was enough for her soldiers to travel back in time, and the ship just waited for them, no matter how much time passed.

Making his way through the upper tiers of the buildings, the Spirit Prince found two huge vats in which there was either tar or oil. They were securely fastened to wooden supports and long wooden gutters were brought to them. The Spirit Prince suddenly had an idea, and he ironically thought that these buildings and ships might not be afraid of time, but they were certainly afraid of fire. He cut the supports and overturned both vats. When the liquid from both spread profusely down the slope upon reaching the dock and the sand soldiers raised the alarm, the Spirit Prince dropped his torch and hid. The flames instantly engulfed the slope and, despite all the efforts of the soldiers, only intensified with every second. It was not possible to extinguish it, and soon the fire spread to neighboring ships. The fire was unstoppable and soon devoured everything except for the only ship that stood at a distance. The sand warriors also died, at least most of them. The Spirit Prince, on the other hand, felt a certain taste for destruction - for the first time he could somehow recoup everything he had to endure. And this was only the beginning, for the locket promised him something more. A force far more destructive than fire. One that will not be stopped by water, as it was in the case of Peski, since water itself was this force. The Spirit Prince finally saw in the fog of visions what the locket was whispering to him. A powerful, crushing and ruthless element that nothing can stop - it was this element that Namtar offered him to bring down on the Island. It is water that can destroy everything - both Peski and the fortress itself. Cleansing in waves will pass through these lands and leave behind only a pile of stones and dirt. Original purity and nothing more.

The Spirit Prince understood that water played a special role on the Island. The fortress was built so strangely for a reason, its shape was an interweaving of two elements. But what was it? An unusual alliance or a deadly fight where each of the opponents grabbed the throat of the other and was not going to loosen his grip? What if one of the elements was just waiting for this liberation in order to do away with the other? Now the Spirit Prince saw the hidden meaning of all this and understood Namtar's plan: he wanted to destroy not only the Sand, but the entire Island. And he left hiding places somewhere in the fortress, which turned out to be still impossible for anyone to find. But the Spirit Prince, inspired by his ideas and guesses, was not going to stop. He was going to find them and end it all once and for all. Eliminate the root cause and stop the madness. And he found the best, as it seemed to him, version of the interpretation of what he saw.

The locket echoed the thoughts of the Spirit Prince, and the visions gradually took shape. It seemed that he was about to understand everything in the smallest detail, everything would fall

into place and he would achieve his goal. The medallion, although it was a product of the Sands and was imbued with their power, spoke of water not as something hostile, but only as something different and different. Namtar managed to somehow change the nature of the medallion, to bend its will. He could not rid it of some of its negative properties, but managed to cope with the power of the Sands. In a sense, clean them up and use them for good. But then why didn't he do it to all of the Island Sands? Maybe something did not go according to plan? At what point did he fail and give up?

The Spirit Prince felt that he was like a medallion in some ways. His body was also made of Sand now, but he barely felt any negative effects on his mind. He remained as clean as possible. The sands did not make a real monster out of him, only distorted his appearance. There was a perfectly reasonable explanation for all this - the Spirit Prince himself was, in some way, a creation of Namtar. The product of his plan, which, it seems, did not take place in its entirety. A drop that floated against the current in a turbulent stream, an occasional spark in the darkness. All that Namtar's titanic efforts were enough for was not to let the last hope die. So powerful were the Sands. He expected to defeat them only by remaining invisible to the last. The prince had to keep this spark alive.

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The Spirit Prince crossed the suspension bridge and turned sharply to the right, advancing along a narrow cliff towards the Mechanical Tower. This road had apparently not been used for many years, but at the very foot of the cliff on which the Mecha Tower stood, he found an abandoned entrance carved in stone. A stream of water flowed through it, which over the years smoothed out the steps, which made it very problematic to climb them. On the lower tier there was a huge reservoir of water, the level of which, apparently, was maintained at a constant level.

The first thought that occurred to the Spirit Prince was to try to somehow overfill this reservoir, disrupting the operation of the mechanisms and flooding everything around. But this time his plan was much more difficult to implement than just turning over vats of oil and setting them on fire. It will take much more effort and, most importantly, you need to find a working, effective way. The point of application of force. Or even make sure that his idea was hasty and far from reality. In any case, he hadn't taken enough time to study the Tower's structure last time, and he should have done it now, after taking a closer look at everything.

The medallion continued to call the Spirit Prince somewhere upwards, to a mysterious point, a hiding place in which something

previously unseen was hidden. He knew that his idea of this hazy image as a kind of door was probably wrong and too free. But he simply did not have others.

The Spirit Prince chose the tactics of secrecy, and avoided contact with the enemy in every possible way, thanks to a large number of passages and covers. The Overseers walked everywhere, every now and then, and he would get rid of them at once if he found what he was looking for. But tier by tier, he never got any closer to his goal. He did not feel that the locket could give him a clearer idea of her, although before he came to this place he had believed that the locket would prove to be not only a guiding thread, but also a kind of key to the mystery. The only thing that the Spirit Prince clearly felt was the constant invisible presence of Dahaki. It followed him relentlessly, becoming stronger and weaker. Sometimes it seemed to the Spirit Prince that he could learn to predict his appearance in time, but so far all his attempts had failed.

What gave birth to this beast? Of course, he was something of a sand monster that the Prince fought, but he was also immeasurably more powerful and even more powerful than any of them. He was tireless, invulnerable, and never forgave anyone. The one who was destined to die will definitely die. All that the Spirit Prince has found for himself in this doomed position is the opportunity to make an important, correct sacrifice, so that his life will not be wasted, senselessly extinguished.

Suddenly, at the same time, two events occurred at once, the combination of which took the Spirit Prince by surprise: the heavy footsteps of Dahaki approaching were heard, and the Double Prince appeared in front of him, as if from the ground, rushing to his death. And then the Spirit Prince realized that he was literally forced to stop him, bringing down one of the sections and cutting off his path.

"What do you want from me?" The Double Prince shouted to him in irritation.

The Spirit Prince paid no attention to the doppelgänger's anger. He knew he was doing it to save his life, even if he didn't appreciate his efforts. And this time, the Spirit Prince really acted selflessly: he ran out to meet Dahaka, so that he could see him and rush in pursuit. This gave the Double Prince a chance to slip away in time and not fall into the clutches of the beast.

The Spirit Prince remembered that there was a time portal nearby, and if he was lucky, he would have time to run to it and hide from Dahaki, traveling back to the present. He rushed after the Spirit Prince the instant he saw him. But the latter's plan really worked: after a few minutes of chasing through the tiers of the Mechanical Tower, the Spirit Prince flew into the portal hall and breathed a sigh of relief. But this time, Dahaka stood behind the wall of water and

stared at him as if he had no intention of leaving. The presence of the beast weighed heavily on him, and he hurried to use the locket, which obediently fulfilled its purpose and transported him back in time. After that, he seemed to fall silent. The Spirit Prince stopped hearing the strange call, he no longer felt the proximity of something important, as if he were in the wrong place. Was it just due to time travel?

But he did not see the answer, and something else occupied his mind. He was aware that, in the first place, he was following in the footsteps of his predecessor, the first Spirit Prince, whom he had once called the Being. And whatever decision he made, it always turned out that all the events repeated themselves exactly. He was unable to influence them and relived everything that had happened, except that he was now on the other side. In addition, the words of the Prince Double burned into his mind: they said that he had just lived not the original, but the events already rewritten by the Prince Double. Apparently, their first meeting in the Mechanical Tower, if there was one at all, was somewhat different. But in front of him was the Prince Double, who had already been to the Garden, where the Spirit Prince had locked him, or rather, locked him in a hall with a portal, and he was able to return to the Clockwork Tower with the help of the medallion and change his path so as not to end up in this prison. Wasn't this what the true locket had been leading the Spirit Prince to all along? To the point where two realities meet, similar, but still subtly different. Was it not through this door that his visions were pushing? And isn't that why the call has died down now? But what does this have to do with the possibility of flooding the entire Island?

There was something else in the question of the Prince Double. Something that makes the Spirit Prince wonder what he really wants. Even from himself. And what did Namtar want from his follower? It is unlikely that he imagined all the subtleties of the situation in which the Prince would find himself. Each of the Princes. Yes, he was indeed aware of many things, he managed to think through and implement an incredibly complex plan, but it is unlikely that he aimed to solve the problems of his follower. Most likely, he tried, first of all, to deal with his own, albeit someone else's hands. And only if they coincided or at least echoed in some way, then the Spirit Prince could find at least some benefit for himself.

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After getting out of the Tower, the Spirit Prince moved towards the massive gate, intending to pass through the Central Hall and enter the Garden. He came to the conclusion that he must continue

to play his part in the fate of the Double Prince. As the locket was silent, he did not know what Namtar wanted from him; All he had to do was trust what he had seen before. Perhaps, as it has happened more than once, he will be able to see everything differently, from a different angle, and understand something. However, there is almost no hope that he will be able to find the key from his vision there.

Suddenly, a noise was heard, and the Spirit Prince saw the Double Prince and Dahaku chasing him. He found it amusing to think that not only did he inevitably lead the beast to its double, but it also led it to the Spirit Prince. Although the Prince Double did not find anything interesting in such meetings - most likely, he had not yet had time to get used to them. The Spirit Prince was well aware of the sense of fatal inevitability that had gripped him at that moment. He had no chance of escaping at all, if not for a random guess to get rid of the locket, which helped him, as he believed, transfer his consciousness back to another body.

The Spirit Prince took refuge in the shadow of an opening that was squeezed into the wall that stretched from the Tower. Dahaka rushed past him and in a second was ready to tear the Double Prince to pieces. And then the Spirit Prince realized that he had to act again! If he didn't distract the beast, it would finish off the Double Prince. And let him throw away the medallion – his consciousness will not disappear anywhere and will not be transferred if the connection in time is broken. Consciousness could not travel separately from the body. The prince-double, like himself, was somewhat mistaken in his judgments. He simply did not remember everything that had happened since he had thrown away the fake locket, as his consciousness from the body that had been imprisoned in the Garden had only been held in this body by the false locket. But if the Spirit Prince hadn't run out of hiding and thrown a stone at the monster, the doppelgänger would have simply died. He understood that if he interfered with the fate of the double once, he would be forced to do it again and again and would not be able to get rid of such a need.

Dahaka reacted immediately. His eyes flashed with red lights, and after leaving one victim, he rushed after another. Apparently, the Spirit Prince was an even more dangerous intruder - the beast did not hesitate to choose which of the targets was more important to him. After that, the Prince Double was able to reach the Garden without any incident other than what the Empress had prepared for him, although he did not remember anything until the moment when he found himself in the hall with the portal, at the point from which his consciousness traveled through time. The Spirit Prince again escaped from the chase, reaching the Garden and, activating the portal that was located under a large rotunda with water flowing from the roof, returned to the past. He wondered what the timeline

had become. Not only does fate keep him on a leash to this day, with enviable constancy and perseverance, but it also takes a form that was already difficult to realize. The properties of time in such circumstances turned out to be truly unusual, one had only to take a closer look. It turned out that the labyrinths on the Island exist not only in the corridors of the fortress, but also in time itself - the past and the future were too incredibly intertwined. So that the future determined the past, and it changed the future. Reality wasn't just turned inside out, it was cut in half and glued together with opposite ends.

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The Spirit Prince, once in the Garden and returning to the past, after a while again felt a strange mysterious call coming from the locket. Why did he talk to him again, and most importantly, what exactly did he want to tell him? About the fact that he made a mistake with the place last time? But this knowledge did not help him very much - he still did not see a path along which he could confidently go to his goal. All he could do was wander aimlessly through the Garden, looking for at least some clue. At the same time, the Spirit Prince was thinking about his destiny. What would happen if he didn't find anything? After all, sooner or later it would all end and, unfortunately, he already knew how. And what then? He felt his body, weakening by the hour, preparing for another rebirth. But what exactly does he turn into, what is this damned Mask really for? He was even beginning to doubt the wisdom of Namtar's plan. All he has achieved is a better understanding of what is happening, but not an opportunity to influence it. And all his hints were too vague and mysterious to interpret them unambiguously and usefully. He was only given a chance to become something of an outside observer. And when his body turns into sand dust, he will become nothing more than an invisible Spirit – pure consciousness, infinitely distant from the material world and his past life.

Despite the swarm of gloomy thoughts that hovered in his head, the Spirit Prince noted that the Garden looked somewhat different from what he remembered it. But, it wasn't because the Empress had such a strong influence on his mind with the help of a fake locket, and he couldn't see some of the moves, feeling himself bound by walls on all sides. It was all about another, real, medallion. He showed the way to the Spirit Prince, who easily found a workaround that allowed him to cross the giant closed door without returning to the present.

As he left this part of the Garden, he turned back at the last moment and saw the surviving crew members waving to the Twin

Prince in the distance. The latter, considering it an illusion, did not attach much importance to what was happening. But the Spirit Prince already knew that this was not a vision, since it was not part of the Empress's plans, and he personally had a hand in the rescue of Rahim, Navid and Tofan. Iman was not with them, but his fate was also known to him. And the Prince Double, meanwhile, despairing of finding another way, returned to the portal. He didn't have the locket with him, and he was incredibly happy to see that the portal had been activated. Most likely, he will decide that it is the Empress who is luring him somewhere, into another trap. But since he was already in it, he had nothing to lose.

The Spirit Prince, seeing these subtle differences, realized that he was still living a rewritten version of events. After all, he himself remembered that he had a locket in the Garden. But now in front of him was the Prince he had saved from Dahaki in the Mechanical Tower, a moment from which he would not remember anything. His consciousness will seem to slip through this period of time, and the body will simply be moved to the right point.

Living in a world of rewritten events, the Spirit Prince felt that he was aware of only half of what was happening. The Double Prince and his fake locket had some kind of influence on the Spirit Prince. His life was not half his own. He had to make the double get rid of the locket. But it turns out that he has already done it! Once the events had been rewritten, he had already locked the double in the portal hall, and now he only had to go there and make sure of it, waiting for him in the right place and at the right time. Everything else lost its meaning - the visions from the true locket were considered false by the Spirit Prince. Maybe not even all, but only from a certain moment. The reason for this was the influence of the fake medallion on the true one. A part of the consciousness of the Prince Double seemed to live in him and his aspirations were transmitted to the Spirit Prince. And that's why, not realizing the clear, ultimate goal, he ran like a shadow after his double from one end of the fortress to the other, coming up with another interpretation of his visions. Although the only important thing was to save the life of the double.

There was no key at all. As well as the keyhole, the secret door. He had already opened all the doors that were possible. He even found the border between the worlds and miraculously did not cross it completely. And on either side of it lay something that made sense in itself. In total, it all turned into emptiness, which he fully felt in his mind now. And if there was no way back, and it was dangerous to go forward, then he really could only balance on this thin line that painfully cut him in half. And now the Spirit Prince understood where he (and now his double) had come up with the idea of a certain

source, a starting, a starting point. The one who divided everything in half. Part of the Spirit Prince's consciousness penetrated into the mind of the double. The true locket, in turn, influenced the false one, and the Prince Double was also unable to fully comprehend its clues, which made him misunderstand where this very point was. And it turned out that the real locket was not so true, and the fake one was not so false. It's just that one person had a little more knowledge available, and he was somehow spared from the direct influence of the Empress. Namtar managed to put some of his skills and knowledge into it, but his work was unfinished. He could only point out the direction, give the most important instructions, and nothing more. He gave me a chance, gave me the opportunity to do something. But what exactly, the Prince had to decide for himself. It seems that this was Namtar's plan.

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Namtar managed to achieve an incredible amount. Even despite some circumstances, he managed to build such an incredible and complex scheme that even the Ghost took his breath away. Namtar did indeed possess some kind of providence, and without some powers, he was still able to imagine what they would lead to whoever encountered them. He knew in advance the feelings and thoughts that would arise in this unknown, but certainly worthy person. And, of course, Namtar was aware of the inevitable doubts, disbelief, and fear that would follow him. The ghost believed that, at times, Namtar was playing a very dangerous game, balancing on the brink of someone else's life and death. He simultaneously gave hope and took it away, captivating the Prince with a strange Mask that practically turned him into a ghost (or Spirit, as Namtar himself put it). But, unlike the Sands and the timeline associated with them, it left its follower with a huge choice. He will have to determine his own path. And even if he fails and falls at the hands of fate, he will have at least one more opportunity. A chance not to disappear completely.

But now, even after going through such a difficult and dangerous path, the Prince, already in the guise of the Creature, was still mistaken about the medallions. There was no connection between them in reality. The fake medallion, although it had impressive capabilities, was only intended to distract the Keepers. When in contact with the truth, it simply turned into dust, allowing the truth to be easily discovered. In addition, he was not the only one of his kind - the Prince came across a whole scattering of similar ones at the Namtar statue, which emphasized their uselessness and worthlessness, but did not pay due attention to this. Ordinary objects or fakes could be easily copied, it was enough to take them from the

future and return to the past - so there were two objects. If desired, you could repeat the procedure as many times as you wanted. But the true Relics of Time—the real medallion, the dagger, the ring, and the hourglass—had always existed in a single copy. Except that Namtar learned to divide the images of these relics, as was the case with the dagger. And it's the same with people – time travel in itself does not give rise to a double. And the Mask did something similar with human bodies.

The Spirit Prince looked for communication where there was none, and did not see some obvious things. For example, the Prince, even before turning into a Creature, during the jump between the Mechanical Tower and the Garden, had a vision of fighting Caileena in the Garden, right next to the cage. Now he explained it to himself that these visions had been transmitted to him through a false locket, which they had in turn leaked from the true locket possessed by the first Spirit Prince. In reality, however, the explanation was somewhat simpler: in a moment of unconsciousness, the second Prince simply discovered the locket that the first Prince had thrown away after defeating Kaileena, but was then frightened off by Dahaka and accidentally dropped it. The false locket (now there were two) from the first version of events gave the Prince this vision. Only a true one possessed such a gift, frightening its owner with a variety of choices.

The prince had yet to realize this subtle difference, which in fact turned out to be a huge abyss. It was in such trifles, subtle differences and nuances that Namtar's teaching that fate, after all, did not exist, lived. Any trifle, any insignificant accident could turn out to be a support or a lever for colossal and important changes. It's all about the right angle of view and the choice of road. It took Namtar a few months to fall into the deepest delusion, and it took the rest of his life to overcome it and open his way to others. The prince had to manage literally in a day, changing the way of thinking imposed by a very convincing opponent. He believed that the last hours of his life were passing away and in the end he would surely die. After all, everything he had seen before was repeated, as it seemed to him, exactly. And he did not notice those very barely discernible differences. Or rather, he did not understand their importance.

The only thing he was right about was that there was indeed some strange connection between him and the doppelgänger, which allowed their minds to blend into each other to a small extent. The mask worked in a different way, it didn't look like a locket that only showed possible paths. It allowed you to live two lives at once, in different bodies. In this case, the choice took place after the path was passed, and not before. And in this, too, the Ghost saw a certain grace and beauty of Namtar's plan. His riddles did not require

intuitive solutions. Everything was built the other way around, as if turned inside out. Absence meant presence, and presence meant complete absence. As if in a reflection, which in a small part made it possible to imagine something whole, and the whole was not real without some trifle.

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When he reached the place where the Creature had once captivated him, the Spirit Prince hid and waited for the Double Prince. He was supposed to appear from the portal any minute, returning from the present. But when he and the double were at different times, the uniformity of its course was disrupted and events could happen both unpredictably fast and inexplicably slow. And before what he was waiting for happened, he sensed Dahaki's close presence. But he once again passed by and surprisingly did not find it, only predatorily looking around.

The Spirit Prince suddenly had the idea that perhaps the silence of the medallion was due to the proximity to the final goal. Then it was understandable why Dahaka, led by the locket, was confused by the same silence every time he got incredibly close to the Spirit Prince. It was difficult to interpret it as a kind of signal, an indication of the correctness of the chosen path. And, then, it turns out that in the Mechanical Tower, when he first fell silent... The Spirit Prince has achieved his goal! It turns out that there is still hope? He slapped his forehead with a sudden insight. But did he still imagine this goal correctly? After all, it is impossible to consider the visions and clues of the medallion separately from the Mask. They acted on him together, as if together. The medallion allowed him to keep a part of his consciousness and memory separate from the consciousness of the double, in the form of the Spirit, a mysterious and incomprehensible essence to the Spirit Prince, and the Mask gave him a new body, albeit such a weak one. If he loses one thing, he loses everything. Combined, the locket and the Mask gave birth to a new entity, something more than a combination of mind and body that was in a precarious balance. She was limited in lifetime, but her abilities could help her do the impossible, after which there would be no point in her further existence. But why did he decide that a sacrifice was necessary for this? What if this is a temporary measure, a kind of ordeal that only needs to be survived? And, therefore, then there must be a way back! But, since the medallion fell silent more than once, then, apparently, there was no single goal. Or, the path to

it was not the only one. What if, on the contrary, he should not help his double, but hinder him? After all, very soon he will kill Kaileena and again deprive him of a chance to fix something.

Meanwhile, Dahaka had disappeared, and a few moments later, the Spirit Prince saw the doppelgänger. He didn't have the locket, which meant that everything was really going as the Spirit Prince expected. For a moment, it seemed to him that he saw an echo of another reality, where the Double Prince was still with the locket around his neck and the Spirit Prince had to jump out of hiding and cut the rope, cutting off the path of the Double. But this vision was quite vague, implicit, and it was easy to distinguish it from reality. The events had already been rewritten, and there was no point in believing the vision. It was as if some inner voice was saying to the Spirit Prince, "No, no, no, it wasn't like that at all!" The lack of the medallion was to his advantage - the Prince Double would not be able to just get into the throne room without getting it again. And for this, he will definitely need time, which the Spirit Prince will be able to use to his advantage.

But what exactly should he do? After all, no matter what he undertook, he was experiencing the same events as the other Spirit Prince who had come before him. Didn't he know the same thing that the second Spirit Prince had discovered for himself? Had he not traveled the same path, trying to achieve the same nebulous goal? Repeatedly and blindly making a choice in the wrong direction, without achieving anything, he sought to get to two places at once, to have time for everything, and as a result, he died over and over again. This turned his life into an endless loop in which everything repeated itself over and over again. And some minor differences were not so important, if the result was the same. His death and the new life of another Prince that will have the same end. Exactly another, with a different memory and body! Despite the connection of their consciousnesses, their lives did not depend on each other in any way. With the help of the Mask and the locket, the Spirit Prince became a separate, independent personality whose existence was not defined by the life of the doppelgänger. His body was made of Sand, and his consciousness was only a reflection of the mind of the double. Or rather, on the contrary, the consciousness of the double was a reflection. Why, then, should we try to keep him alive? Moreover, seeing the locket on him, the doppelgänger will definitely decide to attack the Spirit Prince, because he was deprived of his own.

The very point, the source he was thinking about (sometimes the thought became truly obsessive) was not in one of the Towers, but in between them, in the Central Hall. A point at which their destinies converge and diverge, paths cross and choices are made. What is the point of sacrificing himself and losing all the accumulated experience

and knowledge? He needed to break this vicious circle, to break out of the noose, even if it was only the second time. After all, if during normal time travel he did not meet other doubles, then the Mask gave birth to a single one at the expense of his mind and body. And, therefore, he had a chance to regain them by reversing her effect. Having made a choice. He couldn't take off the Mask - it would completely deprive him of his body, even if it was so worthless - so he had only one way out, which was supposed to be the opposite way.

Realizing what he had to do, the Spirit Prince returned to the Central Hall and waited for the doppelgänger. But this time he did not help him, did not shake his hand, but waited for an opportune moment, pushed him back, straight into the arms of death. This was another small, insignificant difference in the series of rewritten events. A trifle that did not affect anything and was allowed by fate. Dahaka, as the personification of fate itself, at that moment did not care which of the two intruders to capture first. His task was only to remove an extra, foreign element from the timeline. Any of those who are closer. Meanwhile, the Spirit Prince felt the Mask fall off his face, returning him to his usual appearance. Now it even seemed to him that he understood how she worked - as if she absorbed the body that put her on, and when the time came, she returned it. It was indeed hidden from the gaze of fate, but in a much broader sense than the Prince had originally assumed.

He felt that he was no longer falling in half, as it were, and he felt whole again. Even though he himself had once been only a double of the previous Spirit Prince, and the original events had long since been rewritten, he did not feel the burden of responsibility for this death on his shoulders. He was not the first, but he will be the last. And in the end, the Spirit Prince in front of him was willing to make a sacrifice, wanting to impart the necessary knowledge to himself. He saw a different way. Each of them made his own choice. And immediately after that, he wondered: did Namtar have any plan at all?

The road of fate twisted and twisted like a predatory snake that at any convenient moment tried to bite into the leg. And the Prince was able to deceive her only by taking such a decisive and unexpected step, with almost no chance of success, as it might seem. Although this did not mean that he had changed his fate completely. He had outwitted her at a particular point in time, abandoning any plans, risking the only thing he had left. Giving rise to those very minor differences that he constantly encountered and which fate did not notice this time. He committed a forgery, without violating the principle of repetition of events, and, therefore, purely conditionally, did not change anything and remained clean.

Iman, who happened to be nearby—he was forced to travel back in time to fetch Farang—wanted to shout something to the Prince, but when he saw the monster tear him to pieces, literally turning him into dust, he did not dare to draw attention to himself and hurried away without seeing the Spirit Prince's transformation back. He stood still, frozen like a statue, motionless, as did Dahaka, who came within arm's length of him. The cold breath emanating from his body pierced through the Prince. An icy terror permeated his body and mind, but he did not think of moving. It was crazy ideas that had helped him save his life, so even now, guided by one of them, he believed that Dahaka was no longer interested in him until the Empress created the Sands of Time. And the medallion alone, even a true one, was not enough to interest the monster for a long time. And, indeed, in less than a minute, the beast simply disappeared, leaving the Prince alone with his little triumph. He only had to continue to follow his crazy desperate ideas further. Could it be that Namtar's plan was to lack one? In complete freedom from fate and any plans.

The ghost smiled condescendingly, watching the flow of the Prince's thoughts. No matter how many times this time loop is repeated, each new Prince will find the only correct explanation for his choice. And it doesn't matter whether he repeated the previous one or differed from everyone else – it will seem to him the most correct, inevitable and the only possible one. But Namtar's idea was precisely to show that there is no inevitability, and there are countless roads and many choices. And his follower must go through all of them. He wanted him to be able to cover all possible and improbable versions of the development of events. This diversity was the main weapon in the fight against the dictates of fate and Peski - after all, then it is not at all difficult to choose the best possible option. Although Namtar was not too interested in what exactly he would be like, he did not make any guesses or plans and did not have any preferences on this matter. It was only important to him that due to this diversity, a second chance was always preserved, as long as there was a need for it. Even if it were incredibly hazy, dull, and literally ghostly.

Chapter 30. The Plan That Wasn't There

I'm dying... But I guess it doesn't bother me anymore. It doesn't scare me, like a few days ago, when I still couldn't come to terms with it, when I still wanted to fight. Some will say that I have lost hope. I think I found it. How can a person hope for anything if he is afraid of his life, every moment of it, every breath, that he can be the last? And what is death if not a part of life? Not the end, but the part that was born with us and accompanies us through life? Invisibly, silently, it glides after (or maybe one step ahead!) to come to the moment that is inscribed by Fate. And the only thing that matters is what will remain after you...

From the very beginning of our confrontation with Nergal, I did not take into account one important thing - Nergal read my thoughts and easily penetrated into all my plans! He knew in advance almost every step I took. And he was building this trap into which I had led myself – all my victories were not just temporary, they were deliberately allowed by him. With his help, he fished all the plans out of my mind - he only had to use them for his own purposes. Therefore, at some point, I realized that I also had to create a lie. The same large-scale and unexpected. At the same time, it will look like the truth - I must make him believe in my success. Therefore, my first diary at some point became a tool of a subtle game against him. From the moment I found out what Nergal was up to (I thought I had found out), all the entries in him were full of deception, false hopes, anything to confuse him.

I started by creating a fake locket. Perhaps I won't even be able to immediately explain how it differs from the real thing. Except that the appearance catches the eye: the fake is smooth and with a circle in the center, but on the real one I left only a crescent moon, and he himself is rather rough and unskillful. After a vision of the distant past in which Masghik carved this medallion with his own hands, I, in a fit of desperation, tried to correct an ancient mistake by grinding a circle in the center, hoping that this action would have a retroactive effect. And he even tried to throw it into the Abyss, hoping to plunge the whole mountain back into the depths of water. But, of course, this was stupid, I greatly overestimated the power of items imbued with the powers of Sand. Nothing happened to the Island and the fortress. The destruction of evil turned out to be more difficult than its creation.

However, this vision showed me something that I did not expect to see. And something that Nergala should never see. Realizing this, I replaced the vision that the fake gives. In it, the Island has always consisted of two parts, the mountain did not grow out of the water, heeding the call of the medallion, and the Abyss was formed after the

fall of a star from the sky. The medallion was created long before these events and was a symbol of the Island - it was believed that as long as it was in one of its parts, it was safe. When the Abyss appeared, he was imbued with the power of the Sands and gradually killed his master. Although, for a while, he gave him strength and power. And it was the same with the next one, and what happened after it... Until the power of the medallion was exhausted, and people did not understand where the danger came from. And there is no confrontation of the elements.

A simple rearrangement of events, a little imagination and silence about details - so I got a completely different story, in which the medallion seems to be just useless iron, which for some reason has wonderful capabilities. But they are rather superficially attractive. The fake is able to manipulate the Sands in such a way that it is possible to create bridges or walls no worse than real stone ones, but much less durable. The sand seems to be compressed in time and at a particular moment becomes solid. In addition, the medallion allows you to bifurcate time in a strange way - this affects not only objects, but also the consciousness of a person. In fact, this is a property of the Sand itself, its interaction with consciousness and the lack of clear predetermination. The future is a set of possibilities and contingencies, some of which are unlikely and others of which are certain to happen. This feature of the medallion will irritate Nergal, and he will try to hide it in every possible way. In addition, he will never be able to understand how the medallion came to possess all these capabilities. He will endlessly study my diary, but the fake will correspond exactly to what is written there and he will not find a catch. He will even, for sure, try to make several copies. But, fortunately, I discovered all the most interesting properties of this medallion very late and they are not set out on the pages of the first diary. For example, he has the ability, which I gave the dagger, to reverse the passage of time for a short time, still for the same few seconds.

He denies Fate. A true medallion resolutely disregards the fact that the Sands stand a strict line of time and try to keep the whole world within this framework. He is able to see all versions of the past and future at once, even those that have been corrected or changed by someone. But to do this, you should listen to him - the medallion does not reveal its secrets just like that. And those who follow this path will be able to choose the future option they need.

But if you do not know these seemingly small differences, then it is impossible to distinguish them from each other. Or even guess that there is another medallion. And it is enough to throw a fake into the Abyss - and it will fall there without any hindrance! And, besides, like any creature of the Sands of my era, the fake medallion is destroyed

in the water. But Nergal would value and protect him too much to dare to experiment with him. And this attitude will be taken over by his descendants - I refuse to consider them my own, although they are unlikely to be more guilty of future events than Nergal himself - the locket will be passed down from generation to generation. And the tale of the immutability and all-consuming certainty of Fate will live and thrive, helping to bring Nergal's great plan to life. And mine with it.

A real medallion has a special memory. It contains the primordial Sand, the one that was weakly influenced by man. And it has almost nothing to do with the rest of the Island Sands. It is like clay that can be shaped into any shape before it hardens and is fired. I managed to protect him from the influence of Nergal, literally changing it to suit me. This power has imbued the real medallion so deeply that whoever possesses it will be able to destroy any of the fake ones with one touch. It will simply melt into thin air, turning into dust. And this is the surest way to distinguish one from the other. Besides, the true locket holds too many of my memories. Those whom Nergal should not know.

But the main feature of it is that it is part of my true plan. The one described in the first diary is a dummy. It is illusory and highly dependent on the first clue, which, however, is very easy to find or destroy. But I did it on purpose. I want Nergal to believe that I really want to hide these four items from him - the first Diary, the Locket (false), the Ring and the Dagger. In fact, I want him to find them. I've made too many mistakes in making stupid plans and crazy guesses, so I think he'll believe this nonsense. My false plan looks like a strict sequence of actions – this is so typical of who he thinks I am. He will easily find the diary, which will tell him about the locket that is hidden in the Watchtower. With the help of the medallion, he will get the Ring - it will be useful to him to keep alive the myth of the indisputability of Fate. And the ring will show him how to take the dagger in his hands. I'm sure this will also make him very angry. After that, Nergal will proceed to carry out his plan - to transform the Sands of Time into its final, absolute form and enclose it in an Hourglass. A powerful force that controls time and people's minds – I didn't want to make them that way. But where his plan ends, mine only begins.

The order that Nergal established is based on the assumption that the timeline is strict and straightforward, no deviations or major changes are allowed. And there is only one punishment for any violator - death at the hands of the guardian of time. A terrible and merciless beast named Dahaka. I can't run away from him, but I can rely on someone who can hold out against him long enough. He will pick up my false plan at the last point and, taking possession of the

dagger as he pleases, release the Sands of Time from the Clock, breaking the course of time, dooming himself to death and eternal pursuit by Dahaka. And, perhaps, it is in my power to hide a real medallion in such a way that the animal, in an attempt to drive the victim into a corner, will lead him to this most important find. I will be able to deceive the beast into thinking that it will be easier for him to track down the one who possesses this locket.

The medallion will hang around the neck of the statue, around which there will be a scattering of fakes. At first, I created them to give to my supporters. But I lost my last allies before I could do so, and I decided to simply hide them as unnecessary and so as not to arouse unnecessary suspicion. The statue is the one I wrote about in my first diary. It does exist, albeit in a slightly different form. Rather, just as a landmark, as a beacon in this whirlwind of crazy events. Initially, I wrote about her as a joke, hoping that Nergal would believe in her and be confused once again. But then I suddenly saw the point in creating it, and fearing that Nergal would interfere with me in some way, I wrote that it was a momentary stupid idea, hoping this time to hide the seriousness of my intentions. It will preserve the memory of me and my knowledge. Anyone who gets to this point will know that this path is not a fake, not another trap of the Sands, but part of my plan. She is the only thing that will keep the memory of me. Nergal would never do such a thing, not even for the sake of deception. And all the details of my true plan will be preserved by the locket and the second diary.

At first, I wanted to hide the locket in the woods, on Usakar, in the very place where Masgeek found it. But someone could have found it, even if absolutely by accident! It would have been too risky, and I hid it in a safer place. So that only a real daredevil, or a fool, would dare to take this dangerous path and get the medallion.

And, after that, the one who decided to take all these desperate steps will have a choice. He will have the freedom to dispose of life as he wishes, without the dictates of Fate and the timeline - what a pity that I myself saw through this deception too late! But better late than never. And I present this gift to a brave man who is not afraid to challenge the tyranny of the Sands. He will be able to stop at any of the next steps or go through all of them, in any order. And the medallion will be the key to everything, to any of these steps.

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The real vision I had hidden from Nergal led me to another discovery. Once upon a time, in time immemorial, the water that gave birth to all life tried to destroy the Sands by swallowing them. No, rather not even to destroy, but to change, to bring into balance. I was

right in saying that it was a sleepy and silent element, but I was wrong about its hostility. Now I finally see how the world works. Any notion of human-like deities whose grand design created human beings or governs their lives is erroneous. They only clothe their fantasies in the form that is most accessible to them. If a person has not seen anything but other people and animals in his entire life, then it is very difficult for him to look at reality from some other angle, to see a more general picture. But in reality, the world is only a combination of four elements that have been known for a long time – water, air, fire and sand. And they seem to possess some special kind of consciousness, which can hardly be compared with human consciousness. But at the same time, people and all life in general are just another form of existence of these elements. All the diversity of life is built on their different combinations. For example, human blood is a combination of water and fire, which balance each other. Water is mobile and flexible – it forms our body, and fire burns our hearts with feelings, making them beat. At the same time, water does not allow the fire to burn too much, and fire, as a source of energy, does not allow water to stagnate too much. Sand, on the other hand, endows a person with reason, bringing order to his thoughts. And finally, the air... In it lives what we have called the soul since ancient times. Like the tongue of a snake, with each exhalation of a person, it briefly shows out, as if feeling and examining the world around it, and returns back with an inhalation. And when the body has served its time, it dies, and its particles again merge with the elements that gave birth to it. But the soul continues to live, although it is not completely free – it is pulled back – the same principle of "exhalation-inhalation", but on the scale of human life. The soul that has left the body is called spirit. And during the return journey, from the moment of death to the very birth of a person, he seeks to somehow influence a person's life, whispering something to him in a dream. They succeed best in the middle of life, when a person and his spirit are as close as possible in time. But the farther they are from each other, the weaker this influence is. This explains well the fact that man is the least intelligent, skillful, and adapted to life at its very beginning and end.

The different combination of elements in our body is what makes us all so different from each other. Someone is more susceptible to the influence of emotions, the fire in his heart burns brighter than others. Someone is calmer, like the water surface of the ocean. Until the storm breaks out. But this requires simply colossal efforts. And Nergal, apparently, is very susceptible to the influence of the Sands. His mind is always sober, with a steel grip, extremely focused and attentive. And so he realized that his life would not be enough to transform the Sands into its absolute form. It will take many lives,

and it will only set the direction. It would be wrong to say that he is the personification of these future Sands - any person is lost in this abyss. How can you fit infinity into something very small and primitive? It is much more logical for small things to become part of this infinity. And given all the features of Peski, it is their defining part.

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I have said enough about the Sands in the first diary - now I have only summed up the main results. But I would like to tell you more about other elements. Especially about water. For a long time, I had a completely wrong idea of her essence, considering her dangerous and faceless - no wonder, after what she did to Dilmun. But this act did not have the meaningful evil that the Sands are capable of. The water, obeying its nature, only sought to balance them, to prevent them from completely swallowing up the Island. Water is the source of all life, but without reason and feelings, this life has no form. It is devoid of purpose and has no meaning. But in conjunction with the rest of the elements, it is transformed.

If we talk about water separately, then the most valuable thing in the current circumstances is that it is destructive for Peski and all its creatures. At first, not fully understanding Nergal's true intention, I was going to create a special weapon against Zervan - a sword imbued with the power of water, concentrating it in the same way as I did with the Sands and the dagger. In itself, my idea turned out to be correct, but soon its application changed. This is the only weapon that can be used to defeat Dahaka. The Guardian of Time and Fate, guarding the grandiose deception, will fall at the hands of my follower if he proves to be brave and skilled enough.

Nergal turned out to be smarter than I thought - he was not blind and knew exactly what he was doing. And his desire for eternal life has a different form – he does not strive to live forever himself. The only thing that mattered was the direction that he set - that all his descendants did not deviate from a clear and strict plan for a single step. More important to him was the Sands, as a single consciousness, of which he was going to become a part one day. And so they will live forever, having absorbed all the descendants of the Nergal line. This circumstance postpones the implementation of my plan for a monstrously long period - hundreds, or even thousands of years will pass. And during all this time, none of them should guess about the true nature and power of the water element. They should not perceive it as a threat hanging over their world. This will allow you to deliver a sudden and decisive blow, which should be fatal.

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Returning to the first diary, I will add that I also tried to confuse Nergal by carefully making contradictory additions in some entries, if free space allowed. But I no longer used waterproof ink, on the contrary – this is how you can distinguish truth from lies, if you know this secret. Water will show the truth, you just need to slightly wet the page. If I had more time, I would have completely rewritten it, changing the details to make life as difficult as possible for Nergal. Literally lead him to a dead end, a vicious circle with no way out. But I don't have enough time or energy for that. Therefore, I will make do with only postscripts - in them I stop doubting the power of Fate, incline him to the idea of creating an Hourglass by completely exhausting the Abyss and share my despair. Even if he guesses about my deception, it will distract him and give him false confidence in his superiority.

I was not quite right about Fate itself. It still exists in a sense. But not in the form of a book, where every step is clearly spelled out (this is just a trick, a deception created by the Sands), but in the form of a kind of corridor that partially limits the will of a person and the freedom of his choice. The fact is that it is determined not by vague predictions of the future, but by the past. It dictates the future, setting the general direction. And to get off this path, you need to make some effort. But sometimes it happens that some events are already inevitable – it's just too late to change anything. When I realized what Nergal was really up to, I also realized that I had nowhere else to go. But now I know everything – I literally feel it with my skin, so I decided to create a new diary. Number two. But I haven't chosen a form for it yet, and that's why it doesn't exist. It's not even in my thoughts—they're too vulnerable, especially to the monster I'm becoming. I have come up with a special form for my thoughts – they exist as if outside of time. And until I decide to move them somewhere, it's as if they don't exist at all. This is because the knowledge that the second diary gives is too valuable to be thrown away just like that. I need a special hiding place for him.

I wonder how the uncertainty of the future works? It seems to me that at every point in time where we need to make a decision, it branches and many options are created. And it grows to infinity, like a giant tree. Maybe there is a future in which I emerged victorious from this confrontation?

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Now I finally realized the true meaning of my strange dreams and visions. Those reflections that I saw in the Sands were the spirit,

the image of my soul. But they were imperceptibly pale, almost invisible. It seemed that if you stretched out your hand and touched them, they would melt into thin air. As if they do not exist at all. As if they were just a figment of my imagination. In a sense, it was.

I did not come to the idea of the existence of spirits and the world of reflections immediately, gradually. It all started with hazy, vague images inspired by dreams. Communication with Jatta partially confirmed my vague guesses. More and more often I wondered what was there, beyond the line of death. When I began to be disappointed in Peski, I imagined life differently – it is like a drop of water in a huge fountain of life. It rapidly flies up, gradually slows down, and then falls back. And this great cycle is repeated countless times. Beyond good and evil in their usual sense.

And when all my previous plans failed, I turned to this idea. It consisted of creating the Mask of the Sand Spirit, a ghost in material form. Wearing it, I would separate my spirit from my real body and transfer it into a body created by the Sands. And my normal body would continue to exist at the same time, as if I were creating a copy of myself and being able to correct my mistakes. But my attempt failed—the sand body was too weak—I didn't bother to stock up on enough Sand. And it perished in the labyrinth of countless caverns under the mountain in the northern part of the Island, where I had to hide from Nergal. And then I realized that there was another reason why this idea didn't work. But I have a lot more to say before the essence of this reason becomes clear. But I am sure that there will be someone whom this Mask will help to correct their own fate. Almost any person. Just not like me.

Over time, I began to notice that I was experiencing intense heat when I was around the monsters of Nergal. At first I did not attach much importance to this, attributing it to the battle that took place almost every time I met them. But as I delved deeper and deeper into my ideas—they always seemed to be more important to me than defeating Nergal—I realized that these people were practically dead. Somewhere on the border of life and death. And that's why their eyes had this orange color, making them glow even in the dark, blood mixed with golden-yellow sand. But there was no room for the soul in them - they seemed to be expelled, torn out of their bodies, never fully becoming spirits. They were doomed to eternal aimless wandering, without hope of peace. And it was their presence that threw me into a fever. There is also an explanation for this – the same one, which I am silent about so far.

And besides, this heat is another reason why I hid my true vision with Masgeek and the real locket. The touch that transported me through time gave me a new, hitherto unknown sensation – it was as if I were a spirit, and a wave of warmth washed over me as I sat in

the boat next to Masgeek. The power of the medallion would never be enough to move my real body there, the time interval is too long. So I moved as a spirit into the memory that the locket kept. Nergal has absolutely no need to see these details - his meticulous mind can make discoveries that are unnecessary for me.

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I thought that none of Nergal's excesses would surprise me, my senses dulled and cooled. But he stabbed me in the heart, killing Jatta, my faithful friend. It doesn't matter that it wasn't him personally, but Zulu. The root cause of all troubles was still Nergal.

He was eager to get his hands on the locket, and he managed to find out that I hung it around Jatta's neck and sent it to Osakar. When he caught her, after returning, he did not find the locket - I took it immediately after my wound - and killed the unfortunate dog. He does not see the value of a single life, for him they are only material used to maintain the timeline. I longed to help her, knowing that her soul might suffer the same fate as people turned into monsters. After all, he managed to conduct some experiments on her at the beginning of our confrontation, and besides, I don't even know how exactly she died. I only heard her pitiful death moan in the deep silence of the caves. Our friendship was so strong that I would have heard it even on the other side of the world. All the time the world was not worth her death...

***

The whole world was literally at my feet. And I did not seek to use this for evil, I was moving towards a bright goal, towards a great future. And this light blinded me, not allowing me to see all the problems and dangers in time. Now it's time to finally admit that I've lost this battle with Fate. And I am the only one who is really to blame for this, only I! But I must not stop, I must accept this new reality and no longer waste time on regrets. I stop feeling like a person, I become someone else. And I must have time to create all the caches, so that later the Sands that are not destroyed in time do not become the cause of even greater trouble. Otherwise, it will turn out that I will ruin this world altogether.

Thinking about water, I came up with the idea of creating a special key. If I'm fighting against the Sands, I have to see it through to the end. I must destroy not only the Clock, but the entire fortress, by which time there will be no one left in it except for the one who completes my plan. The castle is designed in such a way that the Sand of Time flows along its walls, along an innumerable network of

canals. It is only necessary to direct the streams of water there, and this place will literally crumble before our eyes. I know this channel system well because I invented it myself, and so it wasn't hard for me to come up with a way to do it.

I hid the key itself in the Garden, at the bottom of the fountain above which stood the statue of Inanna. It cannot be seen - water can both show the truth and hide it. If someone does manage to find it, they will immediately forget that they saw the mysterious keyhole in the Mechanical Tower. The one that opened the door to a new world free of the Sands. And when he got rid of it, he would remember it again, but he would forget that he had the key in his hand at all. As if these two objects are from different worlds, different realities. The dictate of Fate, on the other hand, does not allow any other lines, variations in the flow of time. Only those who have a real medallion can preserve their memory. And only he will be able to keep this fragile connection between the key and the keyhole in his head. One turn against the sun and the fortress is doomed - the streams of water will destroy everything in a matter of minutes, depriving this place of its special strength and resilience. The Sands, which were released from the Clock earlier, will also disappear. This will put the final point in their story, ruining them forever. All that remains is to get rid of the medallion and dagger. And there will simply be no need for the Musk.

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Whoever possesses the medallion, as I said earlier, will have the opportunity to choose. He can either save himself by donning the Mask of the Sand Spirit and change his fate with impunity, or kill the guardian of time, Dahaka, by finding a special weapon, and save hundreds of other people's lives. Or maybe he can go further, to the very end, and put an end to the fortress and the entire central island by finding the Key and using it, and perhaps he will find a way to get to the new journal, if I leave any opportunity for it at all.

The path that the Mask opens will never be direct and clear. It will never be simple. Ornate, strange - anything, but not light. Even I myself imagine it only approximately, partially. In the form of some probabilities, opportunities that create a new field for struggle. A fair duel on an equal footing, and not a losing game. Opportunity is exactly what I strive to create and preserve in the darkness of the ages. There must be at least a chance to continue the struggle and choose your own path.

My follower will know about the existence of the Mask almost immediately - the locket will tell him everything. And even if suddenly he is not the first to go this far, he will read all the stories that

happened before him, getting a chance to avoid not only his own, but also other people's mistakes. The mask seems to divide a person in two, completing his reflection in time and space. The phenomenon itself is very similar to dividing a dagger and other objects into two parts. But this time we are talking about a person who is divided into two unequal parts - Sands and Fate forbid this. And they do not consider it possible at all. And at some point in space and time, these two parts – the spirit and the body – converge again and, merging, change reality. At the very point relative to which the reflection is built: the Sand Spirit (at the moment of birth) and the body of the double are separated in time at the same distance from it, but in opposite directions. But the spirit is pulled back and it sinks into time. And only a sand body and a medallion are able to keep him in this world.

I have already told you about the key earlier, and to find the sword, you need to go to the throne room and use the fast passage to the Abyss. But with a real medallion, it will work differently and take the Sands fighter to a secret room under one of the Watchtowers. Even if it was discovered, it would be useless to someone who did not possess the medallion. But with its power, it will be possible to do more than just lure the Sand after you. It will be possible to pull the bubble of time that fills this room. Time has frozen in him, it will forever leave the room as I saw it. Thanks to the bubble, it will never be too late to find it, even if it rusts and literally crumbles over time. By taking it in his hand, my follower will be able to return to his own time, releasing a piece of mine. The power of this sword is so great that even Dahaka himself will be vulnerable to its blows. But it will still be an extremely dangerous enemy.

And my follower, most likely, will not need a new diary at all. If only he wants answers to all the questions.

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Shortly before his death, Jatta, who was watching Usakar, met a young man there who was about sixteen years old. His father served in the guard garrison and taught his son military affairs. But over time, the son stopped recognizing his father - he gradually turned into a monster. He was pure in soul and took the loss of a loved one very hard. The young man was hot and full of desire for revenge, but he did not know where to start. It was then that he met Jatta, and she became his true friend. All this time I was looking at him. His name was Ajit.

Then, after being wounded, I called Jatta back to me, and she could no longer visit her friend. And soon after that, she was killed. Ajit did not know all this, but he was saddened by her disappearance.

The medallion retained a glimpse of Ajit's memory, and I was able to study it. I was interested in only one question - was he the one I was looking for? Will he cope?

I decided that I had to use his anger and desire for revenge - youth is so hot, it does not allow you to think about the consequences and possible failures. And it gave me and him hope, for he was ready to take on Nergal and his entire army of sand monsters without hesitation. And since Jatta was dead, I had to act myself, appearing to him in dreams as a white ghostly vision and making hints and hints. I whispered to him about the Sands, about my hiding places, about his great role in this story. And every day I saw how the fire in his soul flared up more and more. And then I decided to meet him face to face. Under the cover of night, I got into a boat and crossed to the other side. I moved almost silently, and soon I appeared before Ajit - a mysterious guest in a huge shapeless robe with a hood, whose faces were almost impossible to see normally due to the white glow - with the help of all this I hid my current appearance. I addressed him by name and said:

"I am the one who appeared to you in your dreams. Don't pay attention to my appearance, just listen to me.

Ajit was taken aback and could not get a word out. I continued:

"You are the one who will destroy the Sands of Time. I know that you seek revenge, and I will help you. I know the weaknesses of Nergal and will help you defeat in order to return a quiet life to these parts.

Then, I told him about Jatta's fate. This story angered him, he clenched his fists and, barely restraining himself, squeezed out:

"What should I do?" I'm ready to strangle him with my bare hands!

At that moment, he did not ask unnecessary questions, such as: "Why doesn't he do it himself, with his own hands, and not mine?" Instead, he asked:

"Why didn't you come to me right away?" Why did you appear to me instead in dreams, which I most often forgot in the morning?

"That was the point. I needed to see you better, and you needed to get used to me. If I had come to you only now, you would hardly have believed me. And besides, in dreams, your consciousness works differently.

"It turns out...," Ajit hesitated.

–A what?

"Dreams are really given to us for some reason, not just like that?"

–Yes.

"So why?"

"To see reality!"

"But don't we see it during the day, when we look around us with our own eyes, when we talk to someone?"

"Sleep helps to forget the unnecessary generated by the darkness of the mind, shows reality in a different form, not in the way we are used to and not in the way we would like. Bizarre, unrecognizable, exaggerated. But true!

"Then why are they so quickly forgotten and lost?"

"You can't live on dreams alone, they'll drive you crazy instantly. But you can't do it without them at all. Your mind will rot, and you will rot with it!

"So, then...

–Yes!

– ... Do they give us hope? Ajit finished.

"They are hope. The missing part of reality that lives in our consciousness and, despite all the pain and injustice, completes it to the integral world in which we want to live and to which we are going, extending a hand to this hope.

Sometimes dreams replace reality or creep into it so boldly that it is difficult to distinguish between dream and reality. But what happens to them? After all, reality also gets into them, they are built on it. Would there be dreams if there was no reality? Would there be reality if there were no dreams? Can opposites exist without each other? And are dreams as unreal as they seem?

–Hope? Is that all you can offer me? Ajit asked.

–No. But there will come a time when you will have nothing else. And then you will have to remember her, she is like a guiding light in the darkness. But now I can help you. I know how to bring your father back to life!

And then I told him about the Sands, their strengths and weaknesses. He told me about the diary, the dagger, the medallion, the Hourglass. About his fight with Nergal. About the fact that I practically no longer exist, and I would be able to appear to him only in dreams, in the form of the same disembodied spirit and lead him after me. I began to lie to him - from the words about my father. I knew that in fact, no hope would revive the dead, and victory would be much harder for him. In a way, he wasn't even ready for it. And I condemn him to endless torture. Torture by time and your own mind.

Our meeting with Ajit happened after Nergal had found the first four caches. I told Ajit that he must enter the fortress through a secret passage and then find his father. He was to stun and bind him, take his clothes, and sneak into Nergal's chambers. I knew where he hid the dagger, and that's what I told him to find. "The unbelievable will happen," I said, "The dagger is endowed with a special power - its blow will save your father. Then bring it to me, and with it I will put an end to the deeds of Nergal!"

Ajit believed me and did exactly as I said - he was able to deceive Nergal even more easily than I expected! Perhaps he relaxed a little after his victories, in any case, that's what I was counting on. Ajit returned to his father and brought the matter to an end. The dagger, of course, killed him completely. Ajit didn't know that he had saved his soul - that was the only thing that could be done in this situation. Someday he will understand me... But now, it only made him infinitely angry.

Soon Ajit was caught by the guard of the fortress and he did not have time to give me the dagger (and, most likely, he was not going to). But Nergal ordered not to kill him. He began to suspect that he himself did not know something important. That there was some hidden threat that had eluded him. Too purposefully, this young man stole a dagger and, at the same time, did not answer any questions. Nergal ordered Ajit to be thrown into prison, intending to torture him until he told him everything. Wanting to save him from such a fate, I personally stole the dagger and opened the Sands of Time. I had nothing to be afraid of. Taking advantage of the confusion, I created another time bubble in the Ajit Dungeon - I needed a lot of Sand. And then he returned the dagger to its place, as if nothing had happened. But Nergal then had to struggle with the devastating consequences of my sortie for a long time.

In the bubble, Ajit was invulnerable to everything - no one could get inside, not even Dahaka. And he will definitely look for him, because living in eternal prison, he actually deceived Fate and death itself. For Ajit himself, time seems to stop. He will stop growing old and will forever be the same sixteen-year-old youth, but his mind will not be the same. Hundreds of years of reflection, endless thoughts in the silence of eternity. Incessant searching, talking to himself and piercing silence around him. His thoughts will be like castles in the clouds – incredible, large-scale, but seemingly useless. His mind will become something more, new truths will be revealed to his consciousness, if only he stops restraining himself. But in spite of everything, this prison of the mind will not allow him to go mad – it would be too easy. It will keep him sane, preserve and multiply his memory.

At first, Nergal tried to destroy this eternal prison. But then he did his usual thing - he decided to use what had happened to his advantage, thinking that the torture of eternity would make Ajit talk. Maybe not even during his lifetime, but one of his descendants would definitely have to talk to the prisoner. Although, I believe that he will not even know his name!

Ajit could not leave this eternal prison of his own free will either - he was held back by a strong lattice made of thick metal rods. In addition, he was vigilantly watched by the guards, who were awake

day and night. Ajit sank into his own gloomy thoughts, bordering on despair, though he didn't even know what lay ahead. Hundreds, if not thousands of years in captivity of time. Without the possibility of dying.

And then I came to him again. Again in the dream, although in such a place it was difficult to separate dream and reality from each other. Ajit unleashed all his anger on me. I stood silent for a long time and listened to all his curses, until he got tired and, waving his hand, went to the opposite corner. He turned away and sat down, staring stubbornly at the wall. And I began my story. This time, there was more truth in it - about the real medallion and the need to free the Sands to find it, about the cunning of the Sands, about the Mask of the Sand Spirit - about everything, even the sword that the guardian of time, Dahaka, could slay. Ajit didn't say a word in response, but I didn't expect anything else from him. He has almost all the time of the world ahead of him to look at things differently. I told him my first diary and hinted that there was another one, but it would be very difficult to find it and he would have to do it himself.

Before leaving him forever, alone with eternity, I said:

"I'll be back one day, when you're ready." And then I'll guide you.

We did not meet again.

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I understood perfectly well that he did not ask me for this. I deceived and abandoned him, hiding behind good goals. All these years he will be safe, but tormented by endless captivity. He will not be tormented by hunger or disease – time is still for his body, it moves only in his consciousness. A Tom that will one day be mature enough to continue without my help. He will never forgive me, but he will still know that I was right about something. And I did not deceive him about the hiding places and the final goal. But that's the best I could do. An unbroken circle, a plan that cannot be broken by any effort of Nergal. A plan that did not exist. A problem without a solution. At least, until something special happens that I can't even predict. And then, over time, he will understand my real goal - to preserve knowledge and memory for the decisive moment. As if it were the new diary itself, I had finally found a form for it, although some of the entries in it would inevitably be distorted or forgotten. It is reflected in himself, in what he will become. Eternity will help him realize my plan, which he embodies. One day, Ajit will learn to read these pages, and understand who he has been all along. No one but him will be able to read these lines. And then, finally, his search will be over. He will be free.

Sometimes I don't understand why I do good at all – because I want to or because I'm afraid of the pangs of conscience for what I didn't do? But can the way I have dealt with him be called good, even if I pursue a good purpose? It's time for me to finally admit that my mistakes have outweighed my good deeds, and I'm no longer chasing the bright future I've been looking for. I just want to stop these mistakes, restore the world to its precarious balance, and never look people in the eye again. I can't win, but I can at least not lose completely. Let the other conquer the Sands - I leave this hope to him. I am filled with shame and sadness for every decision I make. I beg you, find the strength to forgive me, Ajit!

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From the beginning, Nergal suspected that something was wrong with me. That I have a different nature, not like most people. After all, only a fool like me did not notice the great strangeness - the Sands did not kill me, but cured me. I naively believed that all the people before me had taken the wrong approach, and they were simply using the medallion incorrectly. But in fact, everything was much deeper, and my previous guesses and beliefs were simple stupidity. Nergal, studying how the Sands affect people's bodies, guessed that there was something in me that could be dangerous for him and the Sands, if I learned the true power of it. But he got ahead of me and used it to my detriment. Excessively soaked in Sand, it would spiral out of control, gain explosive power, and turn me inside out, reshaping my essence. Fortunately, he only wanted to achieve a momentary goal - to get me out of the way, without paying much attention to what was happening and without studying its nature. His thoughts were occupied with the further transformation of Peski. But at that moment I saw the light myself. It's all about the elements of which a person is a combination. Most of all, my body was filled with the power of fire. No, of course, I don't breathe flames and don't throw sparks from my eyes. I mean something else – my heart beats in a special way, in a different way. It is my true driving force. And this energy found its way out in the form of constant creation. And also, it was thanks to my nature that I resisted the onslaught of the Sands and was not killed by them. The protective reaction of my body, awakened by their action, is what healed me. I had always strived to cultivate my mind and had definitely made great progress, but I was actually running away from my true nature. I came up with a name for people like me: Heart. It was my nature that gave my touch such a special power. The medallion obeyed me and made the Sands meek until Nergal returned and changed them completely.

Of course, any words spoil the description itself, break the imagery - it is very difficult to convey. I'm not talking about the fact that all people's heads are clogged with earth from the inside, and water runs through their veins with fire. The elements are also not material, the very essence of their properties is important: water is life, fire is energy, movement, feelings. Warmth, or even heat. Sand, on the other hand, brings strictness and order to a person, endowing him with reason. And air is his soul during life and spirit later. He appears at the moment of a person's death and his whole life goes to meet him in time in order to become a part of the great source of all that exists again – the Heart of the World, which is difficult for me to imagine and call in any less pompous way. But people like me – Hearts – are special. We burn without a trace and go into absolute nothingness, and do not fall, like drops, back into the fountain of life. And that's why people like me don't have the spirit. It just can't be, under any circumstances. When I die, I will be completely gone, I will not be able to appear to Ajit either in dreams or in reality. I will never be a spirit, I am different by nature. Not even ashes will remain, only a memory that I hope Ajit will keep.

My strange gift is both my reward and my curse. It appears in random people and is not passed from parents to children. And, moreover, very rarely. Most people, like me, don't even know about it, unless something out of the ordinary happens. How can you hear the sound of rain when you are already deep underwater? This unusual power is able to tame even the Sands, but it is most powerful when people do not even know about it, but simply act, trusting their feelings.

I tried more than once, not giving up hope for a long time, and even tried to create another bubble around myself, but the Mask never worked on me. The main reason for this was precisely my nature. Had I known about it earlier, maybe things would have turned out differently, and I would have coped with Nergal and the Sands. But now I am only an extinguishing flame that will not even leave smoke behind. And that's why the vision with Masgik gave me so many new feelings – I was like a spirit, plunging into this memory, feeling a strange heat with my whole body. But through this feeling, I realized that this is exactly what will never happen to me in reality.

This power played a cruel joke on me - having incredible hidden power, it, combined with the Sands of Time, turned me into a monster. Heart by nature, I, like the red stone in my Ring, was cut by the false lines of fate. Nergal had been planning such an outcome for a long time, though he probably knew nothing about spirits. He only tore out the last few pages of my first diary because they were uncomfortable for him, told too much truth about what had happened and what his new order was based on. But I believe that they have

always been an integral part of my first diary. Perhaps even the most important part of it. Without it, it is impossible to understand what sacrifices I made for the sake of this last precarious balance. This is what will remain after me. This is my invisible, silent help to people. But, however, it may be for the best, because superfluous knowledge can be harmful, and vanity is not a trait that is inherent in me. My sacrifice will not be known to anyone, will not be glorified, and oblivion will one day wash away my shame, and Ajit or anyone else will be able to take the last step and kill Dahaka without hesitation.

Chapter 31. **Heritage**

It is strange for me to say this, but it seems that I believe in Destiny again. All my doubts were a mistake, I find no reason to doubt further. It just so happened that it is no longer for me to carry out this large-scale plan and put an end to the great battle. I am just a cog in this huge mechanism and, having served my time, I leave. I melt, losing a bit of consciousness, having done my part. The one that the great plan of life has prepared for me.

Why am I still writing this diary at all? I guess it's just a habit – after so many years, I can't be any different. Until the Sand finally gets the better of me - and it will happen very soon. I don't recognize myself when I see my reflection in the water, the one I can't even touch. Empty white eyes that glow even in the dark, an animal head and voice. Who am I?

More and more often I have memory lapses - the sand beast gets the better of me, each time it lasts longer and longer. And one day I won't come back. I was wrong to think that my consciousness would remain in the captivity of this creature. No, it will melt away like the morning mist, leaving no memory. I will cease to exist in any form – I will be erased from this world, and this body will finally cease to belong to me. The sand transformed it in a special way – my body is not affected by their usual influence, so their impact was especially strong and caused such a reaction, turning me into its opposite.

It was convenient for Nergal to portray me as a monster, the culprit of all troubles and problems. He still doesn't believe in the power of Fate, but he used that against me, forcing everyone to believe in it and obey its laws - it's very convenient for him that everything goes according to his plan. And he made Fate a reality, which people obediently accepted, bowing their heads. Everything must be subject to a special order, and any violation is punishable by death. And the beast I have almost become will be the guardian of this new order. I will cease to be the master of my body and mind, but I will be more powerful than Nergal himself, the master of the Sands of Time. My powers will be almost limitless, because I am Fate itself. They call me by the name of Dahak.

Namtar's Journal, torn page 1

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As Namtar had hoped, Nergal had no trouble finding all of his hiding places. He started with a diary because he guessed that Namtar wanted to hide something. And since Jatta was gone, the diary was the last thing he could trust. Nergal found it in a secret

compartment of the desk where Namtar usually worked, it was only a matter of time. The last pages were written illegibly and rather carelessly – it was obviously hard for him, he was struggling with the Sand inside him, his body did not obey him well, and it was difficult for him even to write. Nevertheless, Nergal managed to sort out the notes and find all the remaining items one by one. For a moment, it seemed to him that everything turned out somehow too simple for him. But then he realized that it was all very much in the spirit of Namtar (and especially of what he was about to become) - he believed in fate and prepared a clear plan for his follower. But Nergal caught him, and the whole plan was revealed before him. And Namtar himself had not been seen for many days, in any guise. This means that his transformation is almost complete. Nergal realized that it was time to do other things.

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Shortly after Namtar was gone, Nergal breathed a sigh of relief. He had dealt with the devastating effects of the Sands' release, and now he knew that his plans were unthreatened, and his enemy was now the faithful guardian of the order he had created. The flame of his past life has been extinguished in him, and now Dahaka will not allow anyone to interfere with the flow of time and disrupt the course of fate. The punishment for any violator will be death.

There was only one exception to this rule – Ajit. He was making a mess of Nergal's ideal plan, by his very existence. Of course, it was not about him. It was the last, farewell gift from Namtar. A joke, a mockery. As if he had somehow managed to carry out his stupid idea with the statue. And this time, Nergal really didn't know what to do with it. He could not turn the circumstances in his favor - Ajit did not even think of making contact. He did not succumb to any threats, and only grinned at Nergal's next attempt to sway him to his side or force him to do something, powerless against what Namtar had created. Ajit and Nergal could only play by the rules that he left for them: no one can enter the trap of time without the will of the one who is in it. Ajit could have left it at any time, if not for the prison bars and the vigilant guards - Nergal was afraid of Ajit and would never have allowed this. A situation with no way out, which could remain so for eternity, as long as they adhere to the rules and pursue only their own goals. It seemed that doing nothing was the best strategy for Nergal. And if he studied his enemy and looked for an approach to him, then Ajit was simply stubborn. He was young and angry with the whole world, and the time bubble helped him stay that way for as long as he wanted.

At first, Nergal hoped that the prisoner would simply go mad or starve to death, but this did not happen. Ajit stood firm, month after month, and never even once complained. Nergal quickly realized that he could get nothing out of the situation, and he accepted the rules of the game. He only drew the necessary conclusions from this story and decided to protect himself in case of new threats. He always kept the locket and the ring with him (although he kept the ring only until one special occasion), and hid the dagger, leaving it in plain sight. Nergal used the same mechanism for splitting the dagger into two parts that Namtar described in his diary. This ensured that no one could take advantage of it and arrange what Namtar had recently done. Only someone who wears or has recently worn a ring on his hand could take a dagger in such a state.

For a while, Nergal was still haunted by suspicions that he had missed something, and Namtar might still have secrets, but he tried not to share the thought with anyone, and in the end, he decided that it was best to let the idea just die. Even if Namtar managed to do something without his knowledge, no one will know about it and no one will guess - why breed unnecessary questions?

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Namtar left Ajit all alone, alone with eternity, an entire Island of enemies, and a pile of his own thoughts that he still had to understand. And to begin with, you want to figure it out. His anger and hotness hindered him, and for a long time he just rushed from corner to corner - just like the thoughts in his head. It took him a long time to realize that he was standing still in the only sense in which he was free to move as far as he wanted. He considered Nergal his sworn enemy, for he had done such things to his father! But in second place was Namtar, because it was his fault that he was dead, and Ajit himself was imprisoned here. He had no idea the sacrifices Namtar had made for him and that he had created a weapon to give someone the opportunity to kill himself. Ajit did not realize what Namtar had been through, and how he really regretted that he was condemning the young man to this torture of silence. But only in it could he hear something very important, which came in a timid whisper from the depths of his mind. Those conjectures that were shrouded in mist and shielded by the malice of Ajit. First of all, he had to overcome himself. In a place where there was almost nothing to cling to. In a place where any sound from the outside was like the most beautiful music to Ajit's ears. It broke the eternal silence and gave a new impetus to his thoughts. But they were constantly slowed down by the Sands. Despite the fact that Namtar gave this temporary bubble a very specific form and properties, it was still another

creation of the Sands, and they could not help but have an impact on what was happening inside. That's why Ajit's thoughts matured very slowly, something was always getting in the way of them.

But he had everything he needed to grow up and understand the situation around him. The events of his life before captivity could hardly be called boring and uninteresting. The discovery of the Sands by Namtar forever left an indelible mark on his memory - he will never forget this majestic destructive force that gushed like a fountain into the very sky, driving the clouds into a single whirlwind. For a long time, he believed that Namtar had deceived him, but over time, including through conversations (though it felt more like a monologue) with Nergal and those who came after him, he realized that releasing Sands from imprisonment was indeed the only possible step that would help him win. Perhaps he should have done it himself and then he could get to the locket. But Ajit, alas, did not have time to do this and was forced to languish in prison, resigned to the fact that Namtar, in general, told him the truth.

And over time, he understood a lot. He no longer held a grudge against Namtar. He did not condemn him for leaving him, for leaving him in such a place. He outgrew his grievances and became a balanced and wise man. But he stopped believing that Namtar would ever return and help him, although he understood that there were reasons for this. There was an explanation for everything - although Namtar manipulated him, he did not wish him harm. He was only trying to show him the path that he would have to walk on his own, without his help. And one day Ajit understood and accepted all this. Though the years of imprisonment took their toll, and the weight of the centuries weighed on him more and more, squeezing his mind and displacing all hope from there. At the same time, he still looked like the same sixteen-year-old youth. Until he was released by Maharaja in one of the versions of the past. And a Prince in another. Although this was hardly salvation, in the end. But, as Namtar once said, in a large sense, it is not the person himself who is important, but the opportunities that exist for his realization. And the Prince continued on the path of Ajit, in a different time and under different circumstances, but for the same purpose.

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Nergal married young Eresh, Inanna's younger sister, who passionately shared his views, literally idolized him, greedily listened to every word and was ready to strangle anyone with her bare hands who would dare to contradict her lover even in words. Her eyes burned with flames, and her character was a mixture of love and hatred, which became meek only next to Nergal. It seemed that he

had some special power over her, but her feelings and attitude towards him were sincere. She fanatically followed him, supported him in his wildest fantasies. He gave her a Ring and taught her the craft of reading fates. Their alliance was formidable and no one would dare to openly oppose their will.

It is difficult to say whether Nergal really did not feel any affection for her, but he certainly appreciated her loyalty and saw great benefit in her. Therefore, he gave her incredible freedom, letting her get very close to him. He initiated her into most of his plans and secrets; This fascinated her and tied her to him even more. And Nergal did his best to maintain the illusion of a reciprocal feeling, so that sometimes it seemed real to him, so important was it for him. A real gift of fate. A gem that he examined in time. He only had to cut it, giving it the desired shape.

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Having solved the problem with Ajit (more in his mind than in reality), Nergal proceeded to implement his plan. He managed to sufficiently study the influence of the Sands on humans and found a way to merge with them that would not lead to transformation into a monster. He wanted to use the human body as a vessel and refine the Sands generation after generation. Inside the Guardians, as he called them, they would evolve into their true form, turning into serious weapons. In contact with their flesh and mind, they changed, gaining their own consciousness and being filled with power. It was not the same Sands that Namtar had summoned from the Abyss and imprisoned in the Hourglass. They improved and seemed to grow up. They were transformed, taking on a new form through long-term interaction with people.

Nergal's plan from the very beginning was precisely this, despite all the tricks and deceptions. This is what he called the Great Transfiguration – he wanted to create an ideal, an absolute. And he considered Namtar a fool for wanting to preserve the memory of himself and his name by making some statues or entries in his diary. It didn't really matter who would finish this Transfiguration. And so, in fact, Nergal never sought eternal life. He only paved the way for future generations and did everything so that they did not turn away from it. He and his body will be the first refuge for the Sands. But eventually, they will take their place in the Hourglass. After all, man will be mortal, and the Sands will have to exist forever. And when the Transfiguration is complete, they will no longer need human bodies. The greatest achievement, the result of a long chain of events, will not thus be lost and forgotten like the lives of men who pass by. Nergal had long seen this great goal, for which life alone meant little.

He did not want to remain in history at all, believing that in this way any of his weaknesses could be calculated. Nergal only created the necessary foundation, albeit based on lies, for he deceived not only Namtar, but also all his descendants. And even his wife, Eresh. They believed in fate, they saw its embodiment in the form of Dahaka. They blindly followed the path he had shown them.

And, unlike Namtar, Nergal could afford to take his time. Namtar's attempt to create the Clock was just an act of desperation and mad haste. He was in a hurry to create something that would interfere with Nergal. But instead, he gave him the greatest gift – the opportunity to make his dream come true. Nergal, of course, would have gone so far as to create something like this Hourglass himself; perhaps they would even be deprived of their main drawback. But it's hard to deny that Namtar was more skilled at crafting items imbued with Sands magic. And it turned out that their confrontation turned out to be something like cooperation, albeit implicit. Their ideas and skills complemented each other, allowing the Sands to gain unheard-of power.

Nergal appreciated Namtar's every idea and figured out how to give them a second life within his new order. The dagger, split in two and thus protected from the hands of others, he used for a special ritual to pass the Sands from generation to generation. When the time came, he had to leave the body of the next Guardian and move on to the next in order to continue the cycle of the Great Transformation. An elderly ruler would go to the altar above the Abyss, take a dagger, and stab himself with it, using it as an intermediate vessel. To do this, it was enough just to form your thoughts in a certain way and dictate the will to the dagger. And it did not kill, but absorbed all the Sand. After that, the former Guardian put the dagger back on a special rack, and the Abyss instantly healed him, allowing him to go through the earthly path to the end. The other half of the dagger was in the throne room, at the foot of the Hourglass. It was possible to take the dagger in his hands only in one place, so the new Guardian waited for the moment when the previous one finished his part of the ritual, after which he took the dagger and repeated the same actions. But this time, the Sand came out of the blade and soaked the body of the new Guardian. Once again, the proximity of the Hourglass, which had absorbed the Sands from the Abyss all these years, instantly healed the wound, and the new ruler of the Island came into his own. And so on countless times until the Sands are in perfect shape. And then, the last Guardian will no longer go to the Abyss, but will take a dagger, which will be located at the top of the Clock, and, absorbing Sand from his body, will plunge the dagger into a special hole at the top of the Clock. And this will be the completion of the Great Transformation,

the centuries-old mission of the Guardians will be fulfilled. And the Sands of ancient times, the era of Masghik or Namtar, will be no equal to these, new and perfect. Such that it will be impossible to destroy - even the Ocean will not be able to defeat them.

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The first Guardian, after Nergal himself, was Eresh. She was much younger than him, famous for her extraordinary beauty and cruelty. Coupled with her loyalty, she became an excellent first Guardian and fanatically followed her husband's precepts, keeping the entire Island in fear. She was compared to a goddess even during Nergal's lifetime. He had bequeathed her the Ring and the locket from one Guardian to another, and he died after living for almost ninety years, an unheard-of long time by the standards of the Island. She mourned her husband for a long time, and even sought a way to revive the dead, for it seemed to her that there was a power hidden in the Sands, of which even Nergal himself was unaware. But all she had to do in the end was to travel back in time, to find her lost memories, where she could stay with him for a little longer, receive wise advice from him, and be convinced of the inexorability of fate. Her severity was so unwavering and straightforward that even Eresh was powerless against her. She could keep an entire island in submission, but she was unable to cope with fate, which forced her to come to terms with the loss one day and stop all attempts to hold on to the past. She no longer traveled back in time and focused on the Guardian's mission. And she did it so well that many, even centuries later, held her up as an example.

The task of each of the Guardians, in addition to the Transfiguration itself, was to collect Sand from the Abyss and place it inside the Clock. Thus, the Sands of Time consisted of two parts, the raw material from the Abyss and the Sand inside the Guardian. But in reality, they were one, like a divided dagger. As if a reflection of each other, parts that complement each other to a single whole. Like body and mind. When you touch one part, you inevitably have to deal with the other. To conveniently and easily collect the Sand, Nergal used the secret passage that Namtar had left between the altar above the Abyss and the throne room. With the help of a medallion (fake), it was possible to instantly move from one place to another. Namtar once tried to use this move to sneak up on Nergal and kill him. Now it was used as a channel for the rapid movement of the Sand - it would have been impossible to exhaust the entire Abyss without such tricks. And, collecting the Sand with the help of a dagger – it had the same property as the medallion: it attracted the Sands to itself, although not with the same force, only at a short distance – the next

Guardian, over and over again, plunged the dagger into the top of the Clock, filling it with Sand.

The last Guardian in this long chain of transformations was Caileena. Her body contained the very perfect Sand of Time that Nergal had dreamed of, and was ready for the final transition. But it was not destined to take place, in the form she had hoped for. Even though she had a backup plan, Shadi, who could become the Guardian in her place. Fate led Kaileen to die at the hands of the Prince, and the Sands would not remain on the Island forever, imprisoned in the Hourglass. They did not want this, seeing in it a weakness in one of the possible futures. In the one where the Prince and his father steal the Clock from the treasury of Maharaja, and then manage, albeit ineptly, it and their fate with a dagger. The sands longed for freedom, they did not like the restrictions imposed by Namtar. They were going to overwhelm the whole world, give it a whole new shape and transform it forever.

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During his lifetime, Nergal continued to consolidate his power and oppress the inhabitants of the Island. At some point, it became impossible to hide the truth, but, most importantly, it was no longer necessary. The common inhabitants of the Island bowed their heads before him, and those who inhabited the fortress - voluntarily or under duress, went over to his side. And the good name of Namtar remained covered with indelible shame and was almost forgotten over time.

Nergal ordered to replace the golden-yellow canvases with the symbol of the Island with blood-red ones, preserving the symbol itself, but giving it a sharper, more elongated shape. The new color symbolized the cruelty and austerity of the new era. She was literally soaked in blood and suffering. People in it were just raw materials, consumables for the further construction of the future. The inhabitants of Osakar, the outer part of the Island, were forced to grow food for the fortress. Vegetables and fruits were transported in special wicker baskets, which were woven anew each time: the inhabitants of the fortress had no time to make them, and the inhabitants of the outer part of the Island had to spend almost all their time on hard work, so there was no longer any time left for free thought.

In addition, Nergal initiated another terrible ritual: he captured the crews of ships that had the imprudence to approach the Island, tortured them and turned them into monsters, repeatedly experimenting with their final form. He even came up with a way to fuse several bodies together, making not ordinary monsters, but real

giants, giant golems made of flesh and sand. Their bodies were covered with bone armor and they looked especially terrifying. And even detachments of three dozen soldiers could not always cope with them.

But he didn't stop there, and despite his absolute power, he created a small squad of elite warriors who guarded him. In his entire life, there was not a single case when he would need their help. Therefore, these bodyguards became, rather, his gift to future followers. They glided like a shadow, invisibly, behind them everywhere, but they did not distract or irritate them. The guardians called them only in moments of special danger and need.

When Nergal finished building a new order on the Island, he set about designing the future. He slightly changed his original plan and created a fate that was not as strict as he had originally intended, which reduced the number of unnecessary questions and doubts among his followers, the future Guardians. A fate that was too straightforward, unclouded by the veil of time, seemed obviously artificial, incompatible with time travel and human nature in general, an idea he had gleaned from Namtar's notes. From a strict line, Nergal turned it into something like a narrow corridor, walking along which people had an imaginary freedom, but could not avoid some key events. At the same time, their frequency was high enough that the illusion of freedom did not inspire excessive confidence.

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The sands soaked the Island gradually, getting closer and closer to people. Their lives were gradually changing, even in the smallest aspects. They felt that they had ceased to be the masters of their bodies, that something else lived in them, and in midnight delirium he whispered something to them. Over time, people have noticed that the souls of those who die do not seem to leave these places, but continue to wander around aimlessly. And those who were still alive became less and less like humans: weak-willed, with empty eyes, gray skin and stone faces. And these changes were slow enough that no one noticed them for a long time. Nergal did this on purpose, hoping to break their will completely. But at some point, several bright minds appeared – those who saw something bright in the fog of their consciousness, almost forgotten and lost. And all of Nergal's efforts had the opposite effect - the people, or rather some of them, perked up, as if they had woken up from a deep sleep. But they tried not to show it - Nergal should not have guessed about the resistance, even if it was so conditional. It was supposed to look like his plan was just working slower than intended.

People developed a few simple rules for themselves: first, the most important was ordinary, earthly life. Material prosperity, satiety and the absence of diseases are the main things that people need. They couldn't afford it now, but they knew that all their troubles were due to the mad Namtar, and then Nergal (they didn't see the difference between them at all), who cared about some imaginary categories, and ended up making disembodied spirits out of people. This form of life is a trap, destruction for the body and an abyss, unnecessary freedom for the mind. It is not even worth mentioning. Therefore, people tried to keep souls in their bodies with all their might, and even the dead were buried under heavy hollow stone slabs, which, according to their idea, were supposed to hold the soul. All this was accompanied by special magical rituals conducted in secret. They were considered the only possible protection against the sand plague and the evil machinations of fate.

The second rule was a taboo on cruelty and bloodshed. It is difficult to say what it was - a consequence of the obedience of people or their unwillingness to have at least something to do with Nergal's excesses, his experiments on people. Even talking about blood in the human body was forbidden - the enlightened inhabitants of the Island elevated the inviolability of the human body to a cult and consciously rejected this knowledge. Nergal has perverted the very essence of life too much and has gone far in his confrontation with nature. They wanted to get rid of the idea that the human body can be changed by something like the Sands. But this did not mean that they were afraid of the sight of blood - after all, anyone could get sick, get injured or suffer at the hands of sand monsters. All these were considered manifestations of the disease and were subject to mandatory treatment and purification, returning the body to its original state.

Nergal missed the moment when internal discontent and resistance crossed the line, after which it could not but come out. He saw the clarity in their eyes and understood what they were up to. They collectively created the idea of escape, something that Namtar had not thought of. People wanted to leave the Island. But Namtar was thinking about what he thought was a higher goal: to save the world from the dictatorship of the Sands of Time. And the inhabitants of the Island dreamed of a simple and quiet life, like the one they had known before.

Nergal caught these moods, but he felt a little confused. He did everything to strengthen his power, to secure himself and the cycle of the Great Transformation. He knew how to defend himself, he could suppress any uprising. But now no one threatened him or attacked him. People were only getting closer to the idea of just leaving this place, leaving it as it was, without any struggle. And just sail away towards a new life.

He strengthened security patrols, and personally visited Osakar several times. Nergal tried to convince people that the ocean had no end and that only death awaited everyone there. Boundless and cruel, it almost swallowed him up, there is absolutely no one and nothing there. The island is the only piece of land in the whole world, and they are all the only people. It also played into his hands that the inhabitants of the Island almost never saw the ships whose crews he captured and killed - it created the illusion that he was telling the truth. And even though they felt bad here, and their life sometimes looked like a nightmare, at least they were still alive. And outside the Island, there is only an endless gray ocean, with its illusions and deceptions, bringing only death. And all the strangers they have ever seen on the Island are the tricks of evil spirits, mirages, and nothing more. And for a while, it seemed to him, Nergal was able to discourage people from escaping.

But this was only a temporary pretense on the part of the people of Osakar. Some of them really followed Nergal's lead and finally gave up. This group of people considered those who were secretly planning to escape to be insane. But they, like Nergal, did not have the ability to resist the spirit of freedom born in spite of circumstances. Nergal could only speak the language of cruelty. But he couldn't just kill all the inhabitants of Osakar, looking for apostates? And he watched helplessly as more than half of the inhabitants left the Island. Or rather, he had just discovered it one day, they had left quietly and silently, under the cover of night, despite all the obstacles and the heavy guards around the perimeter of Osakar's outer wall. And, although about twenty years have passed since Namtar's death, there were even residents of the fortress among them - high-ranking and learned people who had once been followers of Namtar. One of his best students, Ziusuddu, risked his life to carry out his escape plan, hiding from patrols in the jungle and caves for weeks.

Nergal quickly got used to this incident. He believed that an unenviable fate or even death awaited them. He remembered his experience. And on the Island, there are only those who completely and selflessly obey him and he will not miss them. Neither he nor any of his followers. Nergal learned from his mistake and bequeathed it to future generations.

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Despite all the admonitions and tales of Nergal, the people who fled the Island did not perish and made it to another land. There they found their new home and long-awaited freedom. By this time, the savages that Nergal had encountered had disappeared, some saying

they had left on their own, while others said they had been utterly defeated. But the people who arrived from the Island did not seek to attack anyone, and the locals met them peacefully. And even more than that, with joy, for they still remembered Nergal and his men, the great messengers of the sea. The fugitives were mistaken for their descendants and allowed to return to their land.

They called themselves "blackheads" [*note: the self-name of the people "Sumer" (shum. ùĝ saĝ gíg ga)*], after the name of the Island from whose power they fled. Despite their desire to break with the past, they could not invent another name. And they did not want to. The name of their homeland was much older than the cursed Nergal and was not considered something shameful or forbidden. In addition, they put another meaning into this name - they emphasized the freedom of their minds from the deceptive and deceitful light of the Sands. Although it was more of an ostentatious protest - the reflections of this glow did not leave them for a long time, although it faded with time.

The fugitives brought with them a lot of knowledge and skills. They taught local residents, shared secrets and skills with them. They led a lifestyle close to nomadism, without a written language and a tradition of a single language. It was thanks to this that the language of the inhabitants of the Island quickly became the second language for them, and then the first. The secret of making paper and ink was lost, but the settlers came up with the idea of using clay tablets, which, after writing the text, were dried in the sun or burned in fire. The symbols were squeezed out with special triangular sticks, kalams, and arranged in columns, from right to left. The sands left their imprint on these people, so they themselves called the tablets "material thoughts". All this incredibly amazed the indigenous inhabitants of these places, only strengthening in their minds the image of the heirs of Nergal as extremely gifted, messengers of the sea, almost demigods.

The teachings of Namtar were manifested here and there in the lives of settlers and their descendants for many centuries. This heritage, however desired, could not be disposed of, and so it was depersonalized. The fugitives tried to extract from it only all the most useful things that could be useful to them here and now. For example, the chronology system introduced by Namtar. Medicine based on the action of medicinal herbs. But, due to their desire to get away from the tradition of the Sands, it was very imperfect, sometimes even dubious and ineffective. In addition, due to the taboo nature of the topic of blood, people increasingly forgot what they knew about the human body and eventually began to believe that the first humans were born from clay. This was almost the only surviving memory of the Sands itself, incredibly distorted and quite far from

reality. Over time, it became just a myth about the creation of man by the gods.

In addition, the former inhabitants of the Island have not been able to get rid of the belief in the inviolability of fate, its absolute, irresistible force, which was once imposed on them. They preserved in oral tradition the myth of its mighty guardian, who guards the gates of eternity and watches over the strict order in the flow of time. He was depicted as a giant with a serpent's head: none of them had ever really met Dahaka, did not know his exact name, and certainly did not associate him with Namtar. The only thing they encountered was the staff of Nergal, topped with the head of a serpent. He terrified everyone and eventually became considered a symbol of the guardian. There were rumors that there was a brave man who dared to read fate, trying to find out everything in advance. He allegedly performed the ritual over the abyss, at the entrance to Irkalla, the underworld. This ritual lit fires above him and put them into patterns, which he read like words. This is how the tradition of fortune-telling by the stars in the sky was born. Namtar's teachings have been distorted and destroyed by centuries of misunderstandings, mistakes, rumors, and deliberate rejection of the past. Stories became legends, myths and had little to do with reality. Names were lost in them, and events and places were divided into several different, unrelated entities.

One of these entities was Dilmun. Once the name of the fortress and the entire Island (instead of the name "Usaggigkar"), it became for people something like a lost paradise, where gardens of unimaginable beauty bloomed; where people were happy and did not fear for their lives – they lived forever and did not know diseases; where all the animals lived in peace and not even the menacing croaking of a raven was heard. This place was the birthplace of the very first people. For a long time, the symbol of Dilmun was preserved in the memory of the fugitives, in its original meaning, not defiled by Nergal. The personification of this wonderful land was the mountain in the center of the Island. At one time, people were afraid of her image, believing that she attracted souls and that under her there was an abyss of the underworld of the dead, where they could not find peace and could only wander endlessly on bare stones. The first descendants of the settlers called the mountain Kar. But over time, legends divided it into two images - the peak, reaching for the heavens, the symbol of Dilmun, and the bottomless abyss, destruction for all living things - Irkalla. People believed that the mountain on which the fortress stood was sacred (the name "Kar" separated from it and became the second name for Irkalla), and over time, it became customary to build temples that remotely repeated its shape. From century to century, they began to acquire an increasingly elongated

shape, as if rushing to the heavens. They were erected in the center of cities - large settlements that changed the way of life from nomadic to sedentary. These cities were another echo of the memories of Dilmun. And they soon changed the whole life of people in this area. Between the beds of the two great rivers, one after another, cities began to appear, united by a common language and traditions. This region was named Mesopotamia, which was then changed to Mesopotamia.

The peoples who inhabited these places disappeared or mixed with others, but in spite of everything, most of these traditions and knowledge, multiplied but distorted by time and by the people themselves, in one form or another reached Babylon, which was founded a thousand years later, and its people. Over time, it became part of the Persian Empire and the cultures of the two peoples clashed, once again changing and distorting the heritage of ancient times.

These changes have all but erased the names of Nergal and Namtar. Like the name of Masgik, whose deeds were attributed to one of the greatest and most revered gods, Enlil, he built the very first temple, the great mountain of Dilmun (which was true, in a sense). Nergal descended to the very bottom of Irkalla and there he met the goddess Eresh, the mistress of the underworld, who gave him the Tablets of Fate and became his wife, so the moment when Nergal raised the Ring of Fate from the bottom of the Abyss with the help of a false medallion was imprinted in popular memory. And it was said that he was at odds with his father, which eventually led him to Irkalla. His real deeds were forgotten, perhaps because people did not want to remember those terrible years full of deprivation and hopelessness. In legends, the Island was flooded by the will of the same Masghik-Enlil, who was angry with people and disappointed in his creation. But the brave Ziusudra learned of the impending disaster and saved half of the inhabitants of the Island, directing their ships to new lands. And then Masgik-Enlil descended to the underworld to hold power over those who were still under his control and never returned.

In legends, Namtar acquired the appearance of a small demon who sent diseases. Sometimes he was called a servant of fate and even of Irkalla herself (the second name of the lady Eresh, after the name of the place where she ruled), but he was not identified with the guardian of time. In the beliefs of the inhabitants of Mesopotamia, fate has acquired rather an impersonal character, as a kind of natural force, an element like water or air.

Dahaki's name and role have become even more distorted over time. People called him Zahhak, and since no one actually met him (or met him, but could not tell anyone about it), and initially they had

little idea of his role in controlling the fate of people, he gradually turned from a monster into a man or a creature very similar to him. Legends made him an enemy of one of the kings of antiquity, who wanted to usurp his throne. But the king defeated his army and chained Zahhak to a stone wall in a mountain cave. There was no connection with Namtar in the legend. The fog of time swallowed up the affairs of bygone days and consigned them to oblivion. However, instead of the old ones, the people of Mesopotamia gave birth to new gods, the myths of which grew out of fragments of those ancient legends about the great elements, which could no longer be restored. And only three thousand years after the events on the Island, the Prince, the heir to Shahraman and the Persian throne, was born in Babylon, who touched the lost past in its original form.

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On the Island, time went by. The cycle of the Great Transformation that Nergal had set in motion slowly, generation after generation, was coming to fruition. The guardians protected the Island from attacks from the sea: they tried to keep its existence a secret and brutally dealt with uninvited guests. Even with those who swam to these parts by accident. But, of course, not with their own hands - the army of sand monsters only grew, and there was almost no place for ordinary people on the Island - most of them died of disease and starvation or turned into monsters.

Over time, the inhabitants of the Island made another attempt to escape - some people returned after the first escape to save their relatives and friends. Having found a home and a new happy life, they considered it a betrayal to leave others in trouble, condemning them to eternal torment on the Island. But it was too late - those people who remained had already lost almost all the remnants of human appearance, the will to live, and few agreed to escape. And to the misfortune of the guests who arrived, Eresh found out about the incident and violently suppressed it on the vine - literally only a few survived who were able to escape.

There were also attempts to send the inhabitants of the Island to the outside world and establish a cult not directly related to the Island in order to build the first bridges to the mainland and establish the power of the Sands over them, but the idea as a whole failed - their influence was too weak.

Among the Keepers were men and women, children and old people - the Sands did not know the difference between them. Any body was suitable, as long as the life of the Guardian himself was not in danger - it was of special value. And soaking the body with the Sands prolonged this life, at least for a couple of decades, preserving

the strength and beauty of youth. The sands improved from body to body, and the ritual itself did not change throughout the time - the Keepers strictly followed the precepts of Nergal and rarely asked unnecessary questions. They only accumulated new knowledge for future generations, perfected the defense of the Island, and meekly followed their fate.

The inhabitants of the fortress became smaller and smaller, the old part of the fortress was generally depopulated and began to collapse. Once upon a time, palace guards, nobles and high-ranking titled persons lived there, who over time almost disappeared. All these empty rooms have become simply unnecessary and have fallen into disrepair - everything in the fortress must serve its purpose or must be destroyed.

This went on for about a thousand years, until the era of the last Guardian, which was Caileena, came. She was preparing a replacement for herself - the young and brave Shadi - a distant descendant of the Executor of Zulu - was supposed to be next. But Kaileena quickly realized her exceptionalism. Her mind was different, as close to the Sands as it could be. Her body contained the greatest power that she was yet to know. Nergal had left no guidance for the final Guardian, and it was up to Caileena to determine her own life and her role in the events after the Transformation was completed.

She called herself the Empress of Time, and she did so even before the Sands were imprisoned in the Hours. Caileena considered herself worthy of this title by birthright and sought to benefit from the gift she possessed. Not only could the Sand influence her consciousness, but her mind could also manipulate them. But it didn't feel like a struggle—it was just a series of doubts and good ideas. For example, she quickly realized that ordinary time travel was not enough for her - this is the lot of ordinary mortals. The empress must have the ability to be in several places at the same time. She learned to expand her consciousness through the flow of time in such a way that she could see both past and future events at the same time. And it was as if she was talking to herself, her consciousness was not concentrated in one particular moment. She was going to become a superbeing who lived outside of time and could change the course of her fate. Zervan was what Namtar called this creature in his diary, which was carefully stored in her library. And it was this new knowledge that gave rise to more and more new questions in her. But at the same time, they were a trap, a diversionary maneuver. The sands no longer needed the Guardian, they were going to get rid of her immediately after the Transformation was completed. But, concealing this, they promised her the very freedom and power to which she so longed. They had told her that without the creation of the Sands of Time, she would never have them in full.

Even in her youth, Kaileena felt a craving for everything new, hitherto unseen. She sought to either obtain it by carefully studying the foreign ships she dealt with, or to create it herself. She continued the half-forgotten tradition of the Island's martial schools, adding the teachings of Ubi-Niri. She saw a special beauty in the feminine principle, refined and deadly. The new tradition trained dangerous and unpredictable warriors, nicknamed "blade dancers". They were almost perfect killers - quiet, inconspicuous, not making mistakes and loving their work with special passion. Sometimes they were also called "gentle killers". Although few people experienced meeting them, especially those who could become invisible with the help of the Sands. Their presence was no more noticeable than the wind, and they were betrayed only by weapons in their hands and orange glowing eyes. But they knew how to sneak in a special way, closing them at the right moment and walking blindly, guided by hearing. They moved half-crouching and hiding their weapons behind their backs, as low to the ground as possible.

In addition to the experiments on human beings begun by Nergal, Caileena turned her attention to the animals of the Isle, changing and interbreeding them in search of perfect servants. This is how stone dogs appeared, and birds (mainly large black crows) learned to react to strangers, uniting in flocks and attacking them. Statues of outlandish animals were erected in the fortress, with the body of a lion (her images were often found on ships and clothes of strangers), but with the head and wings of a bird. Someone from the Maharaja's party later even claimed that during the journey to the Island, he saw this creature alive, chained to the floor with a giant chain. But whether this was true or not is unknown. Kaileena's fascination with outlandish and overseas animals was even reflected in the fact that she gave special names to weapons - a snake sword, a spider sword, a scorpion sword and others. She filled the bodies of these animals with Sand, waited for a while, and killed them, enclosing the Sand that had been transformed in the body of the weapon. A person who took such a sword in his hands adopted his character, me, his style of fighting and even partly thinking.

Another area that interested Kaileena was the creation of an entirely new type of creature. Their bodies were almost immaterial, they had no legs and did not float high above the ground. They were called the Shadows. But they were very weak, even throwing daggers and chakras required the strongest concentration from them, so she used them more to intimidate. In general, she considered this experiment a failure - she failed to create pure incarnations of the Sands, devoid of the usual material form. Still, the Shadows were very useful for covertly spying on someone.

When Kaileena realized her situation, she put Shadi on the back burner and made her the head of the Island's guards, giving her some freedom in the process. She, by and large, had never aspired to become a Guardian and was quite content with her lot. Shadi worshipped Eresh, literally extolling her and even imitating her in some ways, but she rather saw herself in battle, in a battle with the enemies of the Empress and the Island. Shadi was a follower of two teachings at once: Sha-Gaz and Ubi-Niri, combining brute force and immense cruelty with sophistication and stealth in her fighting style. But no matter what, Kaileena saw it as a backup plan if something went wrong. Although the option that Kaileena would die and Shadi would be alive was very unlikely - she should die first, protecting the Empress.

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Legends about the mysterious Island of Time, despite all the precautions, still seeped into the mainland. Even among the descendants of the Island's settlers, there were those who no longer knew the ancient legends and dreamed of eternal life, which was granted by the mysterious Island - one of the kings even seriously tried to find him and the Mountain of the Immortal (a mysterious entity, the nature of which no one knew), but had absolutely no leads. Rumors also reached through people who miraculously reached the shores of India, starving and thirsty for weeks in the open ocean. And one day these rumors reached the ears of the young Indian Maharajah, who dreamed of great achievements. Promises of eternal life and incredible power beckoned him on a long journey, almost into the unknown - after all, no one really knew where the Island was located. And, gathering a small fleet and the best people, he set off on a journey, going out to sea along the river and trying to follow the vague instructions of the surviving travelers. Afterwards, Maharaja himself claimed that they were only able to find the Island because he saw it in a dream. And if not for him, they would have had to turn back soon - the expedition was in jeopardy, food and water supplies were coming to an end.

By that time, the Island looked abandoned and lifeless. Kaileena created a kind of time loop and lived only in the past, trying to avoid contact with the outside world. But such seclusion did not please the Sands themselves, and they summoned Maharaja and allowed him to gain the upper hand over the Empress. After the victory, the Indians removed the main relics of Time from the Island, but, thanks to Ajit, Maharaja saw the light in time, seeing their danger, he safely hid the Clock and Dagger in the treasury, to the great displeasure of the vizier Amar [*note: from the Indian name "Amar", meaning*

"immortal"], who greedily wanted to take possession of their power. Namtar's diary, which he found in the Empress's library, promised him extraordinary power. And then the Sands set in motion another plan, in which the Prince was involved. His role was to steal the Hourglass and liberate the Sands, after which he would simply die at the hands of Dahaki. But instead, a chain of events began that went far beyond this plan. In a desperate bid to survive, the Prince made it to the Island and preceded Maharaja in time, once again trying to change the course of history.

All this only proved once again the precariousness and uncertainty of fate, the absence of the clear and precise line that Namtar spoke of and which Nergal promised. Time turned out to be a raging ocean, engulfed in a storm, full of accidents and deadly dangers. And if one second you were alive and safe, then the next you could go down. Like Ajit, who was supposed to survive and go to India with a detachment of Maharajahs, but instead perished due to a fatal accident. And as one of the Princes who possessed the Mask and the hope of a second chance, but was torn apart by Dahaka. What is absolutely in this flow, what can serve as a fulcrum? And what is time in general if the events in it can be changed, but your memory of them is not? What if it's a place that you can navigate, but the events that you managed to change or avoid at all still lie somewhere nearby and, like mountains on the horizon, continue to remind of themselves? Or does each person live in his own time, having his own line, which can intersect and unite with others, or can diverge? In this case, the world in the usual sense does not exist at all – it is only a set of equally probable options for the distribution of matter and consciousness in space, built around each individual person. And does this mean then that consciousness is primary, and everything material is only a consequence of its will?

All these questions could not be answered by any Guardian if he lived even a thousand years. After all, even three thousand years were barely enough for these questions to simply appear. How long will it take to voice them and then find an answer to them? And whose consciousness will be able to accommodate such a complex question? After all, on the scale of eternity, a person is just nothing, a fleeting flash. And, meanwhile, even an eternity may not be enough.

Chapter 32. Fight with Fate

Soon Dahaka will finally get the better of me. It seems that it has always lived in me... Who am I kidding? There is only impenetrable darkness and oblivion ahead, the world will collapse piece by piece until it completely turns into a cold, endless emptiness. The one that I feel in my heart now. The stone crumbles and turns into sand. Water dries up or is absorbed into the ground. The sun's fire is extinguished one day and turns into a lifeless wind that does not warm – there is no life in it. He is only free to scatter sand whirlwinds across the vast expanses. A huge freedom that costs nothing. And what will become of us? We will all become ghosts and go back to where we came from. And only Time will remain...

I will spend my last moments in the Garden, one night when there will be no guards nearby. It is unlikely that I will find any answers this time. It's over. What happened to my dreams? My heart is corroded and destroyed by the Sands, I hardly remember who I am. Who am I, really? I am dust, a faded memory, a shadow in the darkness. I am a faceless nobody. And I will spend my last moments in the face of eternity in complete serenity, not moving from my place and not looking for a way out. Enough of this senseless running, I did everything I could and couldn't do anything else. My time is gone, I no longer belong to myself. My mistakes are too great, as are my mistakes. I believed in what became for me the instrument of execution. The only thing that Sand teaches us, the only truth that he says: you can't believe anything. Sand is incredible in its ability to store the memory of everything, but much depends only on the angle of view, on one's own emotions and illusions. The latter swallowed me up. I myself am an illusion, an invention. I thought I was building eternity, but in the end I destroyed the world. How many things people do just because they can! And, moreover, without thinking at all about the consequences!

Today I finished these last lines, and then I made a hiding place in my library and leave the diary in a safe place. I hope he doesn't find it...

Namtar's Journal, torn page 2

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Having traced Namtar's entire path, from the very beginning to the complete collapse, the Ghost realized that despite all the genius and thoughtfulness of his plans, he did not manage to implement everything. For example, the story about a certain key and a secret door, behind which there is a mechanism for destroying the Island,

powered by the same key, remained fictional. Namtar was too quick to write about them in the second, secret diary. In the impotent anger that was no longer alien to him in the last moments of his conscious existence, he destroyed all the ceilings and devices in the Mechanical Tower, using the power of the water of the streams running down the mountain. And it is this desire, his anger and the realization that he cannot see through to his plan, that is reflected in the real locket, giving the Prince false visions and overly vague goals. It was simply impossible to see the truth through them. It was only possible to catch the common aspiration, which, in general, the Prince succeeded. It's just that, unlike the Ghost, he will never find out the true reasons for all these circumstances.

Nergal was never able to restore the Mech Tower to its former glory and the operation of all its ingenious devices. He had to hastily build wooden ceilings, and from memory build mechanisms that made it work as before. And no matter how much he traveled back in time, he still did not control Namtara Dahaka, and he destroyed the Tower time after time. Sometimes even to the foundation, together with the outer walls. Therefore, Nergal only chose the option in which the destruction was minimal. But they were still substantial. Nergal feared for a long time that Namtar, with the help of Ajit, had some unpleasant and dangerous surprise in store. The feeling of danger and innuendo weighed on him for a very long time, but, in the end, he did not manage to move a single step in this direction.

Now that he had uncovered the whole truth, the Ghost had only one question left - what next? Where should he go? The journey he had been thinking about at the very beginning of his journey? He knew how the Prince's story would end, he saw it all, because now he was not blind. But what about his own story?

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The prince knew exactly what to do. Sometimes knowing what lies ahead can be extremely helpful. He immediately went to the altar to use the medallion to transport himself to the throne room. This time, he wouldn't repeat the mistake and would lure Caileena into the present. The Sands will never be created in this way, and Dahaka will lose all interest in it. But to do this, he will have to skillfully pretend: the Prince will try to repeat everything word for word, copy gesture after gesture, so that the Empress does not suspect in time, counting the slightest differences in the timeline, that in fact, another person is in front of her. Someone who has access to special knowledge and who is not quite what he seems. And when she understands this, it will be too late.

But the Prince's thoughts were really occupied with something else. He wondered if Namtar was as real as he thought. Yes, of course, he created this medallion, safely hid it and it eventually fell into the right hands. The mask, apparently also created by Namtar, gave the Prince a second chance. But what's next? Namtar's traces are lost in the darkness, melt in the fog, and the strange and mysterious hints generally look like fiction. By and large, they did not bring him any benefit, and in some ways even hindered him. The only possible connection to Namtar and the truth about him was in Ajit. But, unfortunately, he died, which once again reminded the Prince of Dahaka's ruthlessness. The last thread broke, depriving him of his connection with the distant past.

However, the Prince understood a lot about himself. He learned to be more aware of himself than a person, being a creature divided by time into several parts. And, despite their seeming disconnection, he saw a certain connection between himself and his doubles. It was still almost weaker than with Namtar, but it became quite real in those moments when, in some incomprehensible way, he, in the guise of the Sand Spirit, and the Double Prince found themselves in the same place and at the same time. Their destinies inevitably came into contact with each other. So much so that sometimes both got confused about what was happening and influenced each other's decisions and thoughts. The prince understood now perfectly well where he had come from the crazy idea of throwing away his swords during the crossing. His thoughts were influenced by the first Spirit Prince, who resigned himself to the inevitability and was ready for a desperate act, fueled only by faith. In order to conquer death, he had to completely stop being afraid of it and boldly step towards it. The same idea was passed on to the second, and then, for sure, to the third Prince Double, who implemented it in his own way. So it was he who was leading himself to the Mask, in the darkness of the cave! Simply because he already knew this path. He existed inside a certain loop that lived according to different laws, and each new turn was layered on top of the previous one, rewriting the events over and over again. And all of this revolved around a single, most important, turning point. Previously, the Prince believed that it was located somewhere in the spatial and temporal vicinity of the Central Hall, at the time of the death of one of the Princes. But it seems that he was slightly wrong, and this point was at the moment when he put on the Mask and first came into contact with the fate of his double. That was the real source, in his opinion.

The transfer to the throne room happened without surprises. And it's time for play, for pretense.

"So you're the Empress?!" The Prince roared when he saw Kaileena performing the ritual near the Clock. He did his best to keep

the mask of surprise and hostility on his face, while trying to discreetly study Kaileena's reaction. She was really frightened and it would take another half a minute before she came to her senses and collected her thoughts. It seemed that she was frightened not by the Prince himself, or even by the fact that he was proving the inevitability of fate by his presence, but by the fact that he had managed to comprehend a secret that even she herself could not understand. He managed to find a secret on the Island that no one had ever found before.

Kaileena threw a dagger at him and began to run. The prince pretended to rush after her and stumbled, dropping his sword. He came up with a great idea, and decided that it was not worth delaying and getting involved in the battle with Kaileena again. If she didn't buy the trick, he could turn back the clock for a while and try something else. However, he was lucky: Kaileena stopped and rushed to the sword dropped by the Prince with lightning speed. It seemed to her that depriving him of his weapon was a great chance to gain an advantage in the inevitable fight.

The Prince, feigning a slight confusion, rose to his feet and began to retreat from the Empress little by little. He gave her false confidence that she was in control of the situation. And he succeeded, she soon spoke:

"There is only one truth, Prince: only one of us can cheat fate today!"

She rushed at him, her sword raised above her head. The prince turned to the dagger, then looked back at Kaileena and rushed to the dagger. And after a moment, he felt his movements slow down, the air around him seemed to thicken and he could not run fast. The locket allowed him to see the truth – he was right in assuming that the Empress was not speeding herself up, but only slowing down time for him. But he was capable of more than that. The medallion could stand up to the Guardian!

After running a few steps and giving Caileena the false certainty that she could affect him, the Prince suddenly turned around and rushed towards her. One light jump, a kick and now he is already swinging over the opponent and is behind his back. It had so violated her expectations that it was now as if the Prince was slowing down the passage of time for her! Kaileen had just managed to turn her head when the Prince had already pushed her in the back, and she fell near the portal to the altar. He immediately ran up to her, grabbed her hand and put the locket to the recess. There, on the altar, he was going to lure her into a time portal and end it all.

Reality faded away, but after a moment, the Prince realized that not everything was going exactly according to his plan. He, together with Kailina, found himself not at the altar, but in some other place.

It seemed suspiciously familiar to him. He had definitely been here before, but he could not remember when or under what circumstances. If he had time, he would have remembered, but now he had to act decisively: Kaileena came to her senses and was already running away. It seemed that she was familiar with this place, and she confidently headed for the exit. Why doesn't she take advantage and rush into battle?

The prince decided that it was not worth delaying and rushed after Kaileena. But as soon as he moved, he was struck by an incredibly strange feeling. It was as if the whole hall had moved with him. The locket in his hand was heavy, radiating glow and warmth. And at the same time, the Prince felt as if he was touching every stone around, seeing the flight of every speck of dust. This place was special, it was filled with something that obeyed the medallion, echoed his will. And it, in the end, came from the one who owned this medallion. This place was very similar to the bubble he had fallen into in prison. And, therefore, he does not need to look for a time portal at all. Luck! And it seems that this medallion is so powerful that it can manipulate time even if it is not at the very edge of the bubble. And with an effort of thought, the Prince imagined its walls; the way they separate one era from another with a trembling murky haze. And a second later, Kaileena crossed this border, to her great surprise, finding herself in the present time for the Prince.

All her fears were confirmed one by one. First the visions in the timeline, and now this. What if he is not who he claims to be at all? What if he was Ajit? After all, she had never seen the face of the latter. Or he told him everything and revealed ancient secrets that were unknown even to her. Even a second touch was enough to feel the power that the locket possessed in the Prince's hands. It was definitely not the same trinket she had slipped him after the fight with Shadi. And what she saw, even for a split second, rekindled the flames of her doubts.

As soon as the Prince stopped for a second and looked around, he finally realized where he was. The decoration of the hall was different from what he was used to seeing in the fortress, it breathed real antiquity, it was simpler and more modest. He did not pay attention to this when he first came here - he simply had nothing to compare it with. But now he realized that he was in the deep past, in a time bubble that someone had placed in one of the two giant Watchtowers on the outer island. The prince had already looked inside, when he and his team waited for the evening to cross to the fortress. And as soon as he remembered what these towers looked like, he suddenly rethought the vision that the medallion gave him. What if the Mask prevented him from seeing the true meaning of the message? And he was looking for the answer in the wrong place?

Those towers from the vision were, in fact, not in the fortress, but on the outer ring of the Island! And the locket tried to show him this way...

Now he understood everything. The Empress was the embodiment of the Island, and here she would die. And then the Island and everything connected with it will finally go down in history. But, perhaps, you should not underestimate your enemy and take the upcoming battle so lightly. It is better for him not to try his luck in trying to get his sword back, but to find some other weapon. And, by chance, he knew where he could do it, so he immediately ran to the foggy spot on the wall, which was the way out of here.

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All questions from the Ghost disappeared in an instant. The same one when he met Her. He did not expect, did not foresee this event. Most likely, because he could not. He had not yet had time to comprehend one infinity when another invaded his world, making it incomparably larger, even more immense. And if before his own mind was the measure for him, now there were two of them and the number of opportunities and paths that were born multiplied innumerably. The only way back was not - now everything will change. Forever.

She returned for the Ghost to this very point in time and space, knowing that she would find him there. She had something to tell him. She needed the Ghost's help, as well as he needed Hers. Their fates were intertwined much more deeply and intricately than he had imagined before. He had not yet been able to see the absolute truth, to the last grain. Time after time, he continued to make mistakes and mistakes, although less than before. Most likely, because the truth is not absolute. One can possess all the knowledge of the world, the wisdom of each of its epochs, and still remain completely ignorant of how the changing pattern of events will take shape in the next moment.

And then the Ghost fully realized his nature: he will forever remain a reflection, he will never completely get rid of human categories of thinking, habits and other features. He can move away from all this as much as he wants, but the connection between the past and the present, even stretched into a thin thread, will never be broken. How can something that is an echo of something else exist separately? The sands wanted to become the only element, absorbing all the others. But the Ghost was not going to repeat this mistake. That was the balance he was looking for.

After meeting and listening to Her, the Ghost realized that the journey would have to be postponed once again. Perhaps for the last

time. She was calling him for help, and it was really necessary. The circle should be closed, and the point should be placed. And all this could not have happened without him, because he is part of this circle.

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Kaileena never imagined that in an attempt to save her life and change her fate, the Prince would go so far. He did what not only she could do, but a whole line of Guardians. None of them managed to get Ajit to talk or get any secrets from him. And many before her did not attach much importance to his existence, but she constantly felt the danger coming from him. But Kaileena couldn't even imagine how this threat would take shape. In the person of a man who will stop at nothing to save himself from death. It seems that he and he are not so different, except that he is clearly more successful than her.

She devoted her entire life to the study of the timeline, which was also not devoid of blank spots. And her omniscience played a cruel joke on her - she became blind and could not find what she was looking for. She guessed that Namtar had left behind not only Ajit but something else, a message or a secret weapon, but she was no closer to solving it. And it was all the more curious for her to watch the Prince. Even with almost nothing with him, except for the cursed medallion, he managed to survive and turn any situation to his advantage. She should have tried not to kill him, but to capture him, in the hope that he, like Ajit, would become an eternal prisoner who would be powerless to harm her.

When Kaileena was younger, she quickly realized that she was the last Guardian. She couldn't explain it, she was just sure. And she got rid of the last people who inhabited the fortress. But at the same time, doubts grew in her. What if her will is completely controlled by the Sands? What if she did not make a single decision on her own? And what will become of her when she finishes the Great Transformation? Her body was only a vessel for the Sands - how would they treat her? Will they throw it away as a mechanism that has served its time? And then the Sands, in order to distract her from unnecessary thoughts, threw her a vision with the Prince, who arrives on the Island and kills her. And every day it became more disturbing and tangible, depriving her of time and the opportunity to think about something else. And now she is in a hurry to create Peski. To be in time before the fateful day.

But she didn't have time. That day has come, and the enemy surpasses her in everything, even in knowledge of the secrets of the Sands. She can only run, hide in the hope that he is not omnipotent. But it looked more like desperation than a real plan. In addition to

Ajit, the Prince was protected by someone else, the one whose hazy silhouette she saw next to him from time to time.

"Who are you?" She asked the Ghost.

"A man who is afraid of death, just like you," the Prince replied to her, taking the question personally.

Kaileena did not pay attention to the Prince's words. And she was completely confused when she saw a second foggy figure next to the Ghost.

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The prince ran outside, but suddenly found that the medallion continued to pull the bubble behind it, and it slowly left the hall at the foot of the tower and trailed behind it. Through its murky veil, the Prince could see Kaileena running up through the air. Obviously, this is a trick like what Shadi did in the Central Hall. Somehow, she knew how to briefly turn the Sand into a support, a solid surface. Kaileena must have figured that the Prince would not be able to do this, and that she would be able to hide from him.

But the Prince was not going to give up, hoping to come up with some way out. First, he ran to the place where he had seen the rusty sword the day before. But with each step he took, he noticed more and more that the bubble that was trailing behind him was changing everything around him, as if returning to the distant past. The waters of the bay receded away, and the Prince ran across the dry, rocky ground on which the towers had originally been built. And here is the sword! But it was not like the one the Prince had seen before. Its blade gleamed in the sun, and the hilt was wrapped in new leather. He looked as he had appeared to the Prince when he submerged him in the water. Then he decided that it was just a strange, inexplicable illusion. Now he has found a way to wrest the blade from the clutches of time! And as soon as he took it in his hands, the locket spoke to the Prince, literally buzzing in his head. That call again! From the new vision, he realized that this was not the most ordinary sword and the medallion did not accidentally lead him to this place. The blade was somehow incomprehensibly connected to the ocean and its great but dormant power. It was as if all his power was contained in this sword, and the Prince awakened him from his long slumber. And this weapon had such strength that it was capable of resisting the Sands of Time! The same missing element that he saw on the statue.

So Namtar's plan did exist? Difficult, almost incomprehensible, but incredibly thoughtful, it led the Prince to this moment. And now he can fully arm himself against fate, finally defeating it.

Running to the place where Kaileena had escaped from him, the Prince found that inside the bubble he could see ancient steps. He

was still changing everything around him, returning to the distant past, in which the staircase to the top had not yet been destroyed. Taking advantage of his luck once again, the Prince ran upstairs and found Kaileena on a balcony as wide and elongated as a tongue. He ordered the locket to absorb the bubble. The Prince no longer needed him - the Empress had nowhere to run.

But suddenly he heard the voice of the locket again. He urged him not to kill Caileena. Or rather, he said that this was not quite the right purpose for this sword. He did not come all this way. And perhaps it was not even the locket itself that was speaking, but this time the sword in his right hand! His power was destined for something more important. And the Prince remembered that he really did not want Kaileena to die in the first place. He was embittered by the eternal fear of death and the very situation between them, its insolubility.

"Who are you?" He heard her question.

"A man who is afraid of death, just like you," the Prince answered her. And after a moment's thought, he added: "I don't want to kill you! You and I are very much alike! There must be another way!

Kaileena reacted strangely to the Prince's words, looking somewhere to the side. And after a moment, he understood where exactly. Heavy footsteps were heard, the air trembled and the cold spread through it. The colors around him faded, and terror began to permeate the Prince again. This time, he was afraid not so much of Dahaki himself as of a sense of powerlessness. He simply did not understand why he was chasing him now. After all, he had pulled Kaileena out of the past, and the Sands of Time had never been created! None of this made any sense, and the Prince felt that he could not even move.

Dahaka walked up to him and pushed him away. Simply because the Prince stood in his way. He flew to the side, rolled over and got to his feet.

"He didn't come for me. Kaileena does not belong to this time, her fate was to die in the past, and the beast is here to solve this problem!" the Prince thought.

He saw a faint glow on the tip of the sword, and a bold, even mad idea came to his head. It is difficult to say what exactly drove him at that moment. Most likely, the thought that there may not be another moment. And that if he saved Kaileena, he would forever convince her of the existence of another way, that he did not want her dead. All this time, he was coming to understand that he sympathized with her, understanding her problem like no one else. They cannot change their fate separately. Only together they are capable of something. But for this, you will have to take a risk. Risk

everything. And the Prince decided on an act even more desperate than throwing away his weapon and putting on the Mask.

"Leave her!" The Prince shouted, more for courage, and as he ran, he slashed with his sword one of Dahaka's tentacles, with which he lifted his victim above the ground. With that, Kaileena fell, freeing herself from her death grip. She quickly came to her senses and ran behind the beast. She was about to run, but she saw the unbelievable: the Prince was fighting a monster on equal terms! With the great and terrible Dahaka himself, the guardian of time, which she had never seen with her own eyes before.

The prince was literally inspired by his luck. The sword seemed to protect him from the beast that was really angry - his eyes flashed red, and he forgot about the Empress. In addition, the sword really hurts Dahaka, and the Prince can take revenge on his offender - the monster will no longer be able to deal with him just like that, and the outcome of the battle is finally not predetermined!

Now everything in the Prince's head finally came together into a single harmonious picture. He understood the connection between the sword, water and Dahaka. The sword was specially created to resist him, because water was the only thing that hurt him. Namtar knew this, but he deliberately kept it a secret. After all, if this knowledge was in the wrong hands, the sword could be found and destroyed! And then nothing and no one would prevent Dahaka from doing justice on behalf of the Sands of Time. Namtar's plan was that there should always be a chance, there should always be a last, most desperate attempt.

The only thing that bothered the Prince were strange visions in which he fought not Dahaka, but Kaileena. And inevitably he killed her, against his will. It was as if two principles were fighting in him. Perhaps Dahaka had such an influence on him, unable to kill him like any other enemy. He continued to push the Prince to think about the inevitability of fate, its inevitability. But the sword in the Prince's hand gave him incredible confidence, he could distinguish truth from fiction, empty vision, and continued to fight for his goal. He had never been so close to her.

But even with the powerful weapon in the Prince's hand, his opponent was still deadly. The monster's attacks were swift and powerful, a hail of blows rained down on the Prince, and he barely had time to dodge and fight them off. He needed to seize the initiative somehow, but the enemy was too strong for him this time. Yes, the sword wounded Dahaka, but the Prince could not get close to him to deliver a serious, strong blow. And then he decided to try one crazy idea. He concentrated as much as he could on the medallion and slowed down time. Worked! Even Dahaka is unable to resist the power of the Sands of Time! Without wasting a second, the Prince

slid past the monster, diving under the huge black hand raised for another blow, and struck Dahaki's leg. A few seconds later, a slow reaction followed - the monster let out a roar in pain, and the Prince in the meantime carried out the second part of his crazy plan. He looked at Kaileena, nodded to her, and tossed the locket from his neck.

Something that until recently might have seemed crazy – to give a real locket to the Keeper! – was the only right decision now. Kaileena will cope with his power and the knowledge that he unlocks. Only she will be able to use it and help the Prince. If only she did it in time. Seconds counted. Fateful moments in which the most incredible and contradictory circumstances are intertwined. Who would have thought not so long ago that the Prince would fight with the guardian of fate, hand in hand with the Empress of Time?

For Kaileena, these moments unfolded into infinity. She barely had time to realize that the Prince had saved her from the clutches of the monster, crossing out all her goals and delusions in an instant, when he had already given her a new surprise! The great gift that had been hidden somewhere on the Island all this time finally fell into her hands. Had she found him earlier, her power would have had no limits. But now she was in no hurry to use it to achieve her old goals. She opened her mind, heard the voice of the locket, and the scales fell from her eyes. She saw Masghik and the birth of the Island, saw the infinity of options for fate, many other scenarios of her life. Without the Ring and away from the Sands, her visions were especially bright and clear. Then, at the very end of that bright flash in her mind, she saw the same thing as the Prince—the two towers and the inevitable collapse of the Island. But it was not necessary to bring him down to the depths of the sea. Namtar paved the way that the Prince managed to find. And he was one step away from completing it - she just needed to help him. He had saved her life so many times, and she was blind and believed in the lies that the Sands threw at her, not paying attention to these actions. It's time to repay the debt. And complete Namtar's path by killing the parasite that once took over his body and turned him into a monster.

Kaileena listened to the locket once more and felt the immense power trapped within it—the bubble that was drawn into it seemed stronger than any vortex when released again without restraining or restraining it. And if she directed it into the beast...

Not another second of delay!

–Away! Kaileena shouted to the Prince.

He instantly reacted and immediately jumped to the side. A moment later, the locket in Kaileena's hands emitted a powerful stream of energy that stabbed the beast in the back. He dropped to one knee after the Prince's blow and was not ready for another one.

The force of the beam threw him to the edge of the balcony, crumbled the railing and hung on the edge. The prince instantly took advantage of this and, running up to the wounded beast, plunged the tip of his sword directly into its head and jerked it from side to side several times to finish it off. A shiver ran through the monster's body and it slid down.

Falling into the water, Dahaka let out a wild cry of pain. A huge black cloud rose above the surface, a whirlwind covered half of the sky. The huge figure of Dahaki towered over the Prince. But it was only a vision, the last embodiment of his formidable but already impotent anger. The beast was dying and in a moment it was all over. The black mist disappeared, and the giant's body collapsed and disappeared under the water.

The prince could not believe his eyes, could not reconcile himself to what had happened. He knelt down, his forehead resting on the hilt of his sword, breathing heavily. Kaileena came up to him from behind and stood beside him. For a minute both were silent and did nothing. It seemed to them that now the world was filled with a silence that he had never heard before. So strong that they could hear each other's thoughts. It is not known how true this was, but they agreed:

"I managed to cheat fate! Is this really possible?"

Namtar had hardly counted on such a reconciliation, nor did he dare to hope for the Guardian's epiphany. But the Prince managed to look at all this from a different angle, he saw the only true path and was able to overcome fate in this ruthless battle.

Caileena felt free for the first time in her life. All her power, all her power, did not give her this feeling. The sands no longer have power over it, do not dictate its will to it and do not throw false visions to it. The threads of the future ran in countless bundles in different directions. And this uncertainty calmed her down and even pleased her.

"Thank you," she said to the Prince, and handed him the locket. She no longer needed him.

The prince silently looked up, stretched out his hand, and took it. It was another half a minute before he asked:

–What now? You won't deny that it's over, will you?

"I need to stay away from this place," Kaileena said. "The changes are too great to answer like this, quickly. I would gladly go with you to Babylon if you can promise that I will be safe there.

Kaileena spoke the last words, looking not at the Prince, but somewhere past him. At the two figures that stood a little farther away. The mysterious patron of the Prince turned out to be more of an outside observer than his real assistant. But the Ghost and his companion had something to tell Caileena before they left the Island.

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The ghost thought of Namtar [*note: from the Sumerian "namtar" – "fate"*]. His path was completed, after thousands of years of living in the form of a beast. And this path he built himself, except that Nergal inadvertently suggested to him the idea of creating a weapon against himself. He created, or at least tried to create, something to counterbalance each of his mistakes. The ring that showed a false fate and inclined to it was balanced by the Mask that hid anyone from the gaze of fate. The dagger gave birth to Dahaka, and the sword killed him. And the secret diary overshadowed all the thoughts and delusions from the first. The false medallion led the Keepers away from the path he had once discovered with the help of the true one. Except that his idea with a miraculous key that led to the door where the mechanism for the destruction of the Island was hidden failed. But he was able to show that there is no single true path and fate is, for the most part, an invention. And therefore, at some point, the path laid by him seemed to break off - the Prince found himself in a bubble, which was a kind of dummy. It did not lead anywhere, did not manifest itself in any way. It only kept an echo of the past and whoever found it had to choose how to use it.

The bubbles were born during Namtar's first experiments with time portals, and were an unfinished version of them. At first, he threw them away and forgot about them. But then he saw their special potential and placed the bubbles in the most appropriate places on the Island - in the dungeon of Ajit and near the securely hidden sword. The bubble at the base of the Watchtower was fueled by the Sands straight from the Clock, slowly seeping through a secret passage that no one knew about until today.

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Caileena could not stay on the Island. And not even because of what the Ghost had told her. The human principle won in it and prevailed over the Sands. She realized that her whole life was empty, the Sands were just using her as a vessel. And now the Island was disgusting to her, there was no point in being here. The Guardian's purpose had now changed, and she had to protect the Sands from contact with the world. To live thousands of lives and prevent a repetition of the catastrophe that the Prince once arranged. But her path will not be easy. Now, instead of blindly following fate, she has to make a choice, and more than once, and determine the future herself.

He and the Prince returned to the Island where the fortress stood, and Caileena extinguished all time portals forever. It's time to get rid of the legacy and finish everything that the Sands started. With the dagger, Kaileena released them from the Clock, and they returned back to the Abyss. Together with the Prince, they were able to make it so that one day it would be flooded by water running from the mountains, and it would never regain its strength. The dagger could not be destroyed, so Caileena divided it in two – without the Ring, no one could use it anyway. In addition, she destroyed the guards of the fortress, turning them into dust, which was soon blown away by the wind. And then she took the Prince to a secret bay, where a small vessel was moored at the pier - it was quite suitable for the return trip.

The prince hoped that they would be able to find or catch up with the crew, but he was afraid that too much time had passed. Although he was in any case very happy that one of the crew members survived. And Haraz was forever locked in the distant past - this is the fate he deserved. It turned out that Kaileena had not really lied to the Prince about him - he was a traitor. A skillful and vile liar who was blinded by the Sands and their power, even if he only heard of them in words, without seeing them in action. He organized the journey only to gain unprecedented power and seize power in Babylon. This surprised the Prince, but this time he had no reason not to believe Kaileena - she was no longer the one who was called the Empress of Time. And he should even thank her for such a service.

"In addition to madness, however, he discovered something else in himself. Compassion and mutual help became available to him. It's just that his mind has become so clear that these simple things have become a revelation to him," Kaileena said. However, the Prince was somewhat doubtful whether these feelings were familiar to her. So she must have put some meaning into these concepts.

Now they had to make the way back. The prince coped well with the small ship and was able to orient himself by the stars, choosing the right direction. But even the cool night breeze was not able to drive away from him anxious thoughts and everything he had learned about the Sands. They seemed superfluous to him, even in spite of their attractiveness.

Could the Sands be useful to the world? After all, with their help, it is possible to prevent wars, tragedies and various disasters. But the risks were too great. Such a government would certainly seduce someone. He had to get rid of them.

"This knowledge weighs heavily on me," Prince Kailin said on the fourth day of their journey. "I don't want to hear that strange voice in my head!"

"It's all about the medallion. It supports your memory. Get rid of the locket by putting everything unnecessary into it beforehand," Kaileena prompted him to decide. "It will turn out that you will seal this knowledge in him.

That is exactly what the Prince did. Now everything is in the past and he can just let go of these memories. To drown him at the bottom of the ocean, where no one will find him, no matter how much he appeals to someone's mind.

Throwing away the locket, the Prince finally felt light. A pleasant emptiness sounded in his mind, and there was a place for peace in his soul. Only one feeling was new and strange – he had changed the world so much, preventing the grandiose chains of events from happening, that he felt as if he had entered a completely different reality. The world in which he once lived no longer existed. But the Prince himself continued to exist and thoughts and memories of a life that he had not lived rolled into his head in waves. His childhood, his relationship with his father and the fate of all Persia were different. And without the locket, the Prince, at times, confused where one reality ended and another began. Every day he discovered something new for himself, something that was not in another version of his life. But he was confident that he could handle it against all odds.

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It's still a long way from dawn. The whole sky was dotted with stars. Large bright dots on a black canvas; white and cold, they watched his every step like millions of eyes. And the cool but pleasant wind gave a feeling of life and peace.

The prince measured the boat three times. The creaking of the boards, mingling with the splashes of water, echoed over the sea surface like the cry of a lonely seagull lost in the infinity of the sea. The dream stirred the Prince's mind - he could not find a place for himself. Terrible pictures popped up in his imagination: he was alone with his fear, with horror. He will not retreat, for there is nowhere else to go. A cloudy mind. Tinnitus. It's cold...

Time after time, the dream popped up in his mind. Sometimes it seemed real to him. Then - complete nonsense. It's over. Or not? Where is the truth?

Nonsense! A simple nightmare. The only memory from another reality that did not want to leave him was so strong. Most likely, it was because the Prince still couldn't believe what had happened. He did not just change his fate, he solved the problem in the most radical way - he killed the terrible and powerful guardian of fate who guarded it from any encroachments. In addition, everything happened so quickly that he simply did not have time to believe it.

The prince traveled a long, ornate and completely unobvious path and found the right door, after which events began to happen at a dizzying speed.

The prince stood at the side and peered into the distance. Nothing could be seen - there was no moon in the sky because of the huge cloud that swallowed it. He looked down at the water, where the waves were crashing against the side, bringing something to the unnatural silence. The prince sucked in a greedy breath. And then he exhaled with pleasure. Again calm and tranquility. And an unusually large and bright moon suddenly peeked out from behind a cloud.

The prince collapsed like a stone into his bunk and fell into a deep sleep. It's dark again. Brightly. Someone's footsteps, laughter. Dark and light at the same time. Delirium. Despair. Infinity. Oblivion...

The bright sun was breaking through the cracks in the boards. It was already high when the Prince stepped on deck: a picture of indescribable beauty appeared before his eyes: the endless surface of the sea, the sun playing with all kinds of colors and reflecting from the water with millions of reflections. Above the ship there was a clear blue sky, without a single cloud. Only the bright, very bright sun. A sense of infinity. And the small vessel makes its carefree way through it. A pleasant warm breeze was blowing.

"You didn't sleep well today. I heard everything," Kaileena said.

"It's surprising that I slept at all. Even now, it seems to me that he is haunting me... us... on his heels.

And again silence. The prince looked into her eyes. They were like the endless sea on which they were sailing. An eternity lived in them - huge, clumsy and cold. But Kaileena was able to defeat her, to curb her power. But the Prince could not understand who was in front of him. Kaileen was definitely not his enemy, but it was as if she did not belong to this world.

"Who are you?" The Prince asked in a barely audible voice.

"And who are you?" I used to think that I knew everything about people, I could see their fates," Kailina answered him in a trembling voice.

Then her voice broke. Something new entered her life. Some kind of shock, discovery, new... No, many new worlds. They had opened to her in an instant, but she seemed to have recognized them little by little all her life, and only now had she found the right key and unlocked all the doors.

She continued:

"I saw your fate. It was intertwined with mine. But everything that happened completely negates what I saw. As if it was a prank, someone's game. Mirage, vision, deception. I was a victim of someone else's plan, which does not take into account a person's life,

his needs and hopes. I, like you, am a relic of the past thrown to the sidelines, which has long served its purpose. And absolutely nothing foreshadowed this victory! Both of us were supposed to sink into oblivion.

The prince was silent and did not know what to answer. He understood what she was talking about, how strong her curiosity was - such that it did not allow her to sleep at night. But he just didn't know what to say. After listening to Kaileena, he thought about it himself. It gave rise to a bunch of new questions in him. Moreover, one clung to the other, flowed out of him. A whole stream of questions is like a river: each drop is inextricably linked with hundreds of others, and all flow in the same direction.

He walked over to the side of the ship and peered into the distance. His thought flew over the infinity of the sea surface like a burning arrow at night - while it flies over the water, it burns like a small lantern illuminates at least something, takes away crumbs of bright truth from the darkness, but when it falls, it will be extinguished forever.

"What will happen next?" He asked Kaileena, but sent his question somewhere into the void without turning to her.

Perhaps sometimes it is worth asking questions of infinity. No, she won't answer, she won't listen, and, most likely, she won't even echo your question. But it will merge into you, change you, perhaps, for a moment, but this may be enough. And then he will go home, leaving him alone with the truth.Only in this incredible, deep silence could he hear her faint, barely audible whisper.

The prince looked at the majesty and power of the elements that surrounded them. Theirs and a small vessel. It was lost in this abyss and, at the same time, it was the only thing that could catch the eye, the view from the outside. To cling as one hanging over an abyss clings to any snag, unevenness or even just air.

It seemed that someone from above was finishing the last pages of his life. The latter are not because death is after them, but because new life is after them. But the last pages are not the last point. And it could outweigh everything that has been written before. It is a pity that such scales do not exist – scales of truth, which will always show the true measure of what lies on their scales.

And no one dared to put this very point. Neither he nor she— Kaileena did not answer the Prince's question. Maybe they were both afraid. Or, on the contrary, they rejoiced in this uncertainty, after all their lives they had been running away from fate. Or maybe the time has not yet come. Time can go slower than their vessel and lag behind by several days of travel, or it can go on a par or even ahead of it. It does not depend on anything or anyone. And people depend. Or they want to depend, afraid to make a choice and put an end to it